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STOLEN WATERS.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE-DANIEL,

Author of "My Sister Minnie," "After Long Years," "Caught in the
Toils," &c., &c.



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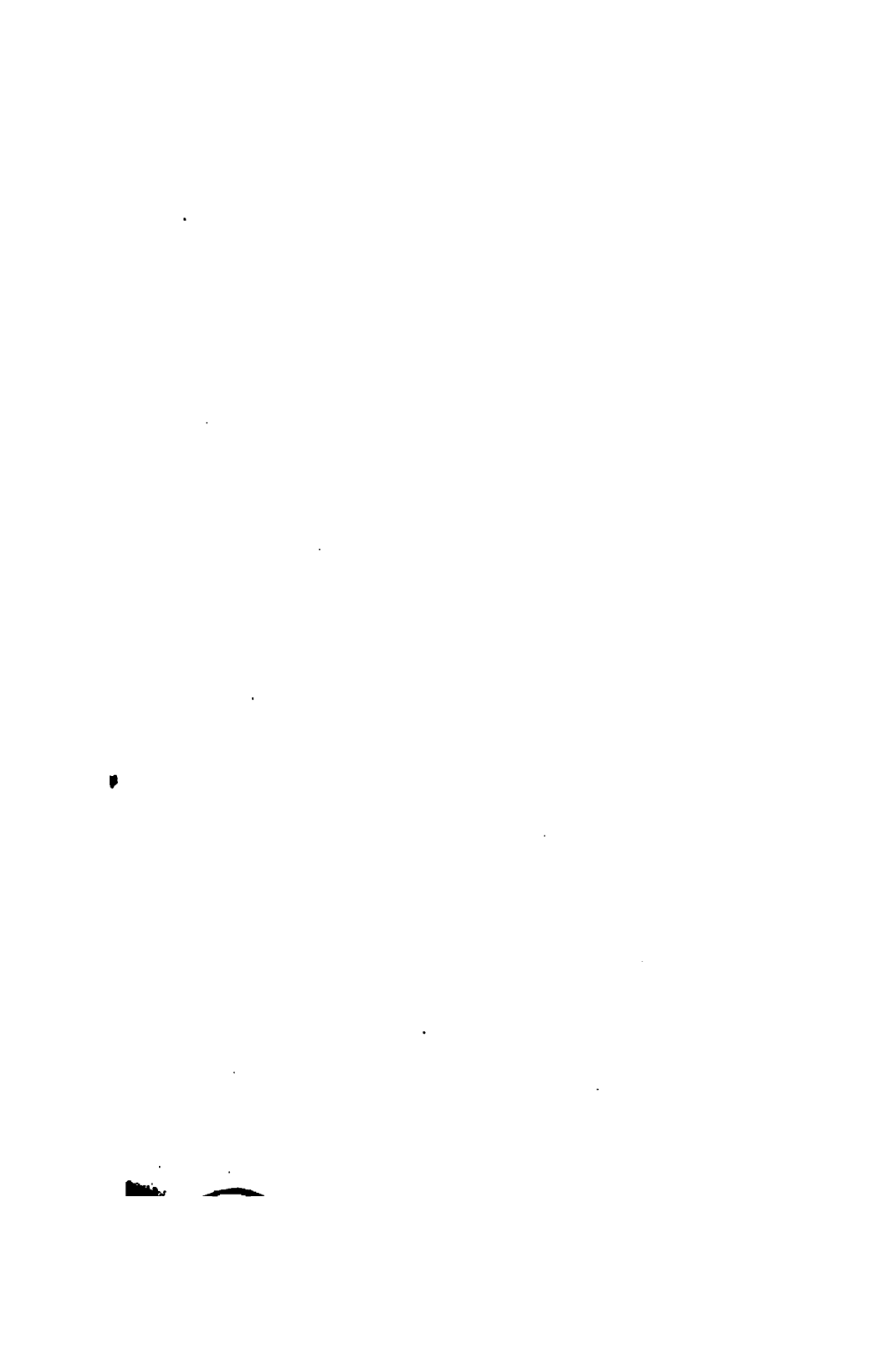
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STOLEN WATERS.

CHAPTER I.

EDMUND TREVANION.

HE came forward with extended hands, and a look which, in a less excited mood, I might have thought too confident of a joyful welcome, too wholly destitute of the humility which a yet unaccepted lover is bound in any case to assume.

“Forgive me,” he said, in the soft, persuasive voice that was so well calculated to make me forget whatever might not quite have pleased me in his looks, “for startling you in this uncourteous way. You will acquit me when you hear my

justification ; but first of all " (possessing himself of my two trembling hands, and fixing those dangerously eloquent eyes upon my burning cheeks) "let me tell you what unhopd for happiness this meeting is to me. I had not thought to see you, to claim the fulfilment of a certain promise, until your beautiful woods were rustling in the summer breeze, and the June roses had begun to blow. I find the roses on your cheeks instead, and fairer ones than our dull earth could ever produce ; but I must have other token than these sweet girlish blushes that you share in some slight degree my rapture at the present meeting. Tell me, just tell me in the simplest words, that you are glad, and then I will hasten to explain it all."

It was well he stopped here, for my poor brain was growing dizzier and more hopelessly bewildered every moment, and not one of all the strange dreams I had dreamt under that sparkling fountain beside us, appeared half so strange and unnatural to me as this reality.

"I *shall* be glad," I managed to say at last, for his eyes looking into mine seemed to melt my feeble soul, and to draw the truth out of me. "I shall be glad when I can be sure that I am awake ; but I am not at all sure of it yet. How can I be when you flash upon me from some mysterious region in this sudden and alarming manner ; you, a friend of poor Charles Trevanion, at the very moment when his rival and the usurper of his rights has been summoned by the mistress of the Priory, and is here with her, doing his best of course, and, I daresay, succeeding only too well, in alienating her utterly from her own guiltless son. Do, please, tell me quickly (for I am expected indoors) what it all means."

No chance of my getting indoors while my hands were detained in that clinging, caressing pressure, which quietly resisted all my little weak attempts to release them, and seemed to say, "You like your prison in spite of your foolish strugglings, and you are not going to be let out."

Smiling still, while I talked, though I fancied

my allusion to Mr. Trevanion had brought a momentary cloud over my friend's expressive face, he said, when I had done—

“I did not know that you were one of the partizans of Charles Trevanion ; but we will speak of this another time. You will admit at least that his rival, as you call the unknown cousin, has hitherto been a very passive and innocent actor in the family drama. He could not help his name, which alone conferred on him the honour (or odium according to you) of being chosen to take the place the rightful heir forfeited by a low alliance. How, if esteeming and pitying the disinherited son, and actuated by a principle of justice, this maligned relative consents to accept all the benefits Mrs. Trevanion would heap upon him, to become the nominal successor to her fortune and estate, only that when the money and lands are actually his own he may restore the greater part to Charles, and have the proud satisfaction of being the instrument selected by Providence for recalling the prodigal

to his home, and killing for him the fatted calf? As I see that light is dawning on your mind, I will no longer talk in parables. I am Edmund Trevanion, the cousin you have been preparing yourself to despise and shrink from. You owe me some amends for this, and I am going to put your generosity to the test. You must keep our secret—the secret of our previous meeting—from Mrs. Trevanion still. I have grave reasons for demanding the favour at your hands, and I think, I hope”—(seeming to enjoy the mingled emotions of wonder, incredulity, and admiration that must have been depicted in my face)—“that you will not refuse it me. Speak, Rosebud—you see I have heard, and am venturing to apply to you that sweet name your discerning friend indoors has given you—speak, and assure me that you both pardon me for being who I am, and that you will grant my urgent request.”

But it was some moments before I could speak, even in answer to this anxious and gracious appeal. A tide of wondering, startled thoughts

was sweeping over my soul, awakening sweet and strange emotions never experienced till now, thrilling me with their marvellous revealings, and leaving me little strength for anything in which feeling had not the first and largest share.

My companion must have read my heart to some extent, though, being a man, he could not form an adequate idea of how strongly a man's nobleness can move a woman; but he must have guessed in part what was stirring me so deeply, and keeping me dumb when I ought to have spoken, for quite abruptly he led me back to the seat by the fountain I had recently quitted, knelt beside me, still holding my hands closely in his own, and said a few low soothing words that had no particular meaning, but were just such words as confessed lovers breathe softly to each other, and derive such extraordinary mutual comfort in breathing and hearing.

So I grew calmer outwardly under his skilful ministrings, and could tell him, after awhile, that it would be easy to me to do what he wished,

that I could but place unlimited confidence in one who was resolving to act so nobly and generously as he had intimated his intention of doing, that I warmly and enthusiastically applauded his design, and felt sure (youth is always so sanguine in its views of poetical justice) that he would be amply and abundantly rewarded even in the present world. I thought within myself I would leave it to good Mrs. Malcolm to decide what would be his recompense in the world to come.

Then he smiled upon me both with his lips and wonderful eyes, and clinging more fondly than ever to the hands which were lying passive enough now in his wilful grasp, said earnestly and tenderly—

“ Perhaps I could not have finally resolved on the sacrifice your sweetness and innocence approves, but for the hope of a reward which would more than atone to me for the loss of a hundred fortunes, though each of them included as fair and luxurious a home as this. Let me speak plainly and openly to you, my own and

only love, at once. I came here at Mrs. Trevanion's bidding, expecting to find an eccentric, peevish old woman, and to be made to feel that if she dowered me with her money and lands she did it grudgingly and under protest, because of the accident of my name, and because her pride incited her to carry out to the letter her first wrathful vow as regarded her offending son. But instead of all this I find a very gracious and amiable lady, who not only receives me with the utmost courtesy as a kinswoman, and as the mistress of the house to which she has invited me, but tells me that, as it is now her cherished wish to see her successor here united to a wife who will grace the home of her forefathers, she has sought and found a young lady who realises all her own expectations, and who, she is quite sure, will not fail to realise mine. So far I had listened to my strange hostess with a mingling of astonishment and indignation, remembering a certain Sunday last October, a certain hope in reference to a coming June, and feeling that even

my unhappy cousin's prospects through me must be scattered to the winds if they could only be furthered by my marrying the fairest lady in all the land, that lady not being the sweet vision who had taken my sometime restless heart by storm one bright afternoon in Yarvil churchyard. A moment's patience yet, Rosebud, though the rose tints on that dear face are lovely enough to tempt me to linger over my story for a chance of gazing at them still. A moment's patience and I have done. While my utterly rebellious soul was meditating a stern refusal to take a wife so oddly and unceremoniously provided for me, Mrs. Trevanion nearly deprived me of breath by saying in continuation 'the young lady I am speaking of, though only known to the world as step sister to my country doctor, has, in point of fact, as good and as pure blood in her veins as you and I. Her father was a Highland gentleman, descended from one of the oldest lairds in Scotland, and not unremotely connected with the royal Stuarts. When I add to this important

recommendation that she s as fair and graceful as the bonnie Queen of Scots herself, and as fresh and sweet as a rosebud, which name I have bestowed upon my pretty guest, I think, however fastidious my good cousin Trevanion may be, he will not shrink from the introduction. And now, if it accords with any romantic notions you may be possessed of to effect this introduction yourself, Miss Seton is in the large conservatory on the east side of the lawn, and you may go and bring her in, only don't keep the poor child botanising above a quarter of an hour,' added my very original relative with an encouraging smile, 'as the luncheon bell is going to ring, and ours is a punctual household.' Judge how long it took me to find my way to your hiding place after this, and what degree of contumaciousness I am likely to exhibit as regards the obliging and felicitous wishes of my esteemed cousin."

Ending thus, he bent a little nearer to me, with looks that told even more than his eloquent

words, and seemed as if he was about to take me, as well as my yielding hands, into a passionate embrace; but though, in truth, this brief and startling interview, with its marvellous revelations, had knit my weak heart closer to its dream hero than ever, I was still Jessie Seton, a proud and, ordinarily, undemonstrative Scotch girl, and every instinct of my nature rose up in arms against such swift and red hot love making.

"The quarter of an hour has more than expired, Mr. Trevanion," I said, releasing my hands by a sudden desperate wrench, springing to my feet, and standing, with a look I meant to be expressive of insulted dignity, before him; "so now, if you please, we will return to the house, and get over the formal introduction with as little violence to our respective consciences as shall be possible. I have said, I trust you wholly and without reserve; therefore, I will not even ask why an assumed name, when you came to Yarvil in the autumn, was necessary."

"You may ask what you like, you sweet,

prickly wild rose," he exclaimed, forgetting, I do believe, all but the lover in that moment, "if you will only give me a hope of winning the dear love which is to be my reward for all I am meaning hereafter to sacrifice. Nay—you shall not go, though twenty luncheon bells clamoured in our ears, until you have told me whether a certain letter of mine ever reached its destination, and whether it is your will that I remain at the Priory or leave within an hour. I only remain on the condition of having your authority to do my best in gratifying Mrs. Trevanion's wishes or whim. Now, speak, my pretty captive, and your words shall decide my fate. You may tell me about the letter first."

"The letter is all right," I said, in a humbled voice, for I felt that with my heart pleading so passionately for the man beside me, the man whom I really liked the better for the mastership he was usurping over me, all my weak, impotent strugglings were no more than a foolish beating of the air; "the letter is all right, and safe in

my possession now. For your other question, you have no sort of right to ask it yet—you place me at a cruel disadvantage; but we must go in, so I have no choice but to say—remain.”

And then for very shame, though all my pulses thrilled with a hidden joy, the tears rushed to my eyes, and I knew nothing more till he had taken me in his arms—as his promised wife, he said—and kissed me.

It had all happened so quickly, there had been so little time for reflection of any sort, such an irresistible call upon the abnormal and unhealthy emotions of the mind, that it is not an exaggeration to say, however extravagant it may sound, that for the next few minutes I walked beside the man who had claimed me for his own in so bold and impetuous a manner, not knowing whether I was in the flesh or out of it, or, perhaps, rather believing that I was being cheated by one of those strangely life-like dreams which we can hardly think to have been a dream when we awake from it.

Even Mr. Trevanion's first words after we had left the conservatory, prosaic and unromantic as they were, did little in dispelling the brain-mist which was enshrouding me.

"I have yet," he said, in that calmer tone which, our stolen love scene over, I suppose he deemed it necessary to assume, "to answer your question as regards the name by which I first introduced myself to your household. It was not a feigned name, as you too hastily concluded, but only an abbreviation of the appellatives to which I am justly entitled. My parents—blind, I must imagine, to the absurdity of the proceeding—christened me Edmund Ernest Paget Trevanion. Not desiring, last autumn, to have my presence in the neighbourhood known, I took the two middle names, which I prefer dropping ordinarily. This is frequently done, Rosebud, and need never excite a wondering thought of yours again—but" (as I was about to assure him it never would) "just one word more. Your step-brother, Doctor Beresford—he sees Mrs. Trevanion often; she

probably makes a sort of confidential friend of her doctor. Do you think you have sufficient influence with him to persuade him not to allude in any way, here or elsewhere, to our interview in October? This is an important matter to me, and I must confide it entirely to your tact and management."

I was not so hazy but that I could detect an anxiety in his tone which he sought to conceal under a light, indifferent manner; and realising already that it was mine now, and ever henceforth, to soothe, and help, and comfort the man whose love I had accepted, I hastened to reply—

"There is no fear of Doctor Beresford meddling in things which do not concern him, nor has he ever been, as far as I know, on confidential terms with Mrs. Trevanion; still, it will be easy for me to make sure of his silence by telling him you request it, and I am quite certain," I added, with a sudden warm glow at my heart, "that he will be no less disposed than I am to place implicit

trust in one who is meditating the noble, generous deed of which you have spoken to me."

A moment's silence, and then my companion, switching rather energetically at a few innocent flies with a riding whip he had in his hand, said, in a somewhat hurried voice—

"My sweetest Rosebud, your *naïveté* is most bewitching, but will, nevertheless, require a little judicious guiding on my part. It is one thing to tell *you*, my future wife, and the woman I adore, of the trifling sacrifice I propose hereafter making on behalf of my poor cousin, and another thing to boast of it to a man and a stranger. Believe me, my pretty novice in the world's ways, such a confidence to Doctor Beresford, either from me or you, would be most ill-judged and irregular. We must not even dream of it. I think, with you, that your excellent brother is to be trusted not to gossip, and, in any case, I will risk this rather than bear the imputation of publishing my own good deeds before I have a chance of executing

them. You quite understand, and fall in with my wishes?"

I said "Yes," in a low and suddenly depressed voice, for this talking about Doctor Mark had brought back, as from the grave, all the sad and regretful thoughts which had been occupying me so exclusively up to the minute when Edmund Trevanion had burst like a flash of light upon me at the door of the conservatory; and not all my new born and bewildering happiness could for the moment make me forget again that he who had loved me for long years would be rendered utterly desolate and miserable by the same cause which had flooded my life with such brilliant and dazzling sunshine.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

THE moment I came into Mrs. Trevanion's presence that day, I felt sure that Malcolm's fears concerning the effect upon her health of this meeting with her hitherto unknown relative, had not been imaginary ones. She was looking more excited, more restless, more wrought up to an unnatural state of feeling, than I had ever yet seen her, and though she received both Mr. Trevanion and myself with a gracious smile (assuming that the time we had been together had sufficed us to get over all the strangeness of a first

introduction), and talked and laughed during lunch, with a vivacity wholly foreign to her usual manner, I knew, beyond a possibility of doubting, that her mind was miserably ill at ease, and that all this outward gush of spirits would leave upon her the after effect which intoxication leaves upon a weak or diseased brain unused to stimulants.

I quite believe that the high-pressure state of her own feelings, the predominance of personal thoughts and emotions of an agitating and disquieting kind, helped materially to prevent Mrs. Trevanion from observing anything that might otherwise have aroused her wonder and suspicion in the friendliness so abruptly established between Edmund and myself. We both tried hard that first day to act the hypocrite, and be ceremonious and formal with each other, but besides that it soon became apparent there was no actual need for it, our acknowledged love was too new and sweet a reality, too much a part of ourselves, to make the utter concealment of it in any way easy.

And another thing that favoured us greatly in

the matter of hindering offence to our consciences, was the fact that Mrs. Trevanion, accustomed all her life to the exercise of an imperious will, never questioning that whatever she desired to see accomplished must necessarily be both possible and easy of fulfilment, had taken it for granted from the first that her cousin and myself would do our respective parts in furthering her views concerning us. What more natural, according to her theory, than that a man with a disengaged heart should fall in love with a pretty girl as soon as circumstances brought them together, and that the pretty girl, aware of the great advantages he could confer upon her, should be quite ready to listen to his "lover's vows," whether her own heart had a voice or not in the matter.

Of course, the indisputable external attractions of Edmund Trevanion would make a speedy reciprocation of his admiration on the part of the favoured object of it appear quite in the ordinary course of things, and thus our way was delightfully smoothed for us in all respects, and I could

not help wondering a little why, even on that first day of our happy betrothal, Edmund should every now and then relapse into a silent, pre-occupied, almost gloomy mood, seeming at these times to forget both my presence and that of his very attentive and gracious hostess, and looking as if he had a world's weight upon his mind and shoulders.


Mrs. Trevanion, who, though she had brought her relative and myself together with a special object, was by no means forgetful of "the proprieties," accompanied us in a long country drive that afternoon, and afterwards detained me with her till dinner-time.

"For," as she said, laughing and patting my blushing cheek, "I don't intend my pretty Rosebud to lose her sweet young bloom by being gazed at overmuch, even by a gay and handsome cavalier like my good cousin Trevanion. I am glad Edmund has a pleasing exterior, for, between ourselves, Jessie, I hate ugly men and women, but we must look to the qualities of his head and

heart, my dear—you and I—before we commit ourselves to the indiscretion of thinking too highly of him. Luckily you are Scotch, little one, and therefore as unimpressionable as you are proud and undemonstrative.”

But though she thus spoke, she was firmly persuaded in her own mind that all her schemes, as far as I was concerned, would go smoothly as a marriage bell, and that unimpressionable or not, I should fall an easy prey to the more than common fascinations of her good cousin Trevanion.

Again during dinner Mrs. Trevanion persisted in exerting herself beyond her strength, and this not because she in any way doubted my ability or willingness to entertain the stranger, but because she seemed to shrink nervously from her own thoughts, and so rushed into lively and animated conversation to get rid of them. She took more wine too than she was in the habit of doing, and was looking painfully flushed and uncomfortable when at length she asked for the



support of my arm to exchange the dining for the drawing-room.

"Not now thank you, my dear Edmund," she said, as the gentleman politely darted forward to assist his aged relative, "I have grown used to depend on my pretty Rosebud for this little service, and you have done no justice as yet to the tolerably supplied cellar I am so happy in placing at your disposal. We shall have tea and coffee in half-an-hour, and then you can join us."

"Men, however charming, Rosebud," she exclaimed, in a weary voice, when I had safely landed her in the state chair, "grow fatiguing after awhile, especially if for more than fourscore years you have seen their ways and their goings. By-and-bye you shall sing and play to this honoured guest of mine, who, you must know, is to have all my broad lands and acres when I am gathered to my fathers. I expect," she continued, with one of her grim smiles, "that my good Beresford would tell me I have

"been doing my utmost to accelerate that resolution, even by my unwelcome assertions of to-day, and sure was my heart. I believe he would be in the right. We must send for him soon and introduce him to Edmund."

Thus not tending to raise my own spirits, I sat down in a stool at Mrs. Trevanion's feet, and rested my forehead upon my clasped hands as a signal that I too was tired, and in no mood for talking.

"You are thoughtful, Rosebud," said the old lady, presently—for necessity was evidently laid upon her to chatter unresistingly to-day. "I suppose it would not be fair yet to ask your opinion of Mr. Trevanion, though at your age, I believe, I appraised the merits of every man I saw in less than an hour. The girls of this generation have not half the romance and impulsiveness that they had in mine, and of course it is far better so. The heart is not likely now-a-days to run away with the head, or imagination to hoodwink the judgment. Still you may

have decided privately whether my cousin is a man to please you or not."

As she spoke she twined her half palsied, feverish hands caressingly amongst my hair, and there was something in this movement and in the almost entreating way in which she had spoken the last words that suggested to me the odd idea that Mrs. Trevanion had a prevision that her own end was near, and yearned for some definite sign that her cherished plan would soon be accomplished. Under this impression, and really compassionating the poor lonely old woman for all I believed her to be suffering, I said, with some earnestness, my face being hidden from her observation—

"Mr. Trevanion pleases me above everybody I have ever met. You cannot wonder that it should be so, since you know how quiet and uneventful my life has been, but"—here I paused and debated rather anxiously how I should put what I wanted to say next, what I had been thinking of during the whole of dinner time—

"but, dear Mrs. Trevanion," I went on blunderingly at last, "if Doctor Mark comes here he will certainly take me away with him. Hannah Beresford would never consent to my staying even with you while Mr. Trevanion was at the Priory. She has extremely rigid notions, and I am her ward, and should not dare to disobey her."

"Then we won't have Doctor Mark here—that's all," said the old lady, querulously, and as if she was struggling desperately with an inclination to go to sleep, "I shall not want him professionally, or if I did I would do without him rather than have my Rosebud violently wrested from me. By-and-bye, in a little time, I may not so much mind sparing you for a brief season to your own people, but just now it is quite impossible, so let us both ignore Doctor Mark's existence, and enjoy ourselves while we have the opportunity."

Then the weary voice dropped, the head fell to its accustomed side when a day nap was in ques-

tion, and in another minute the old worn-out mistress of the Priory was in a deep, if not refreshing, slumber.

Edmund came in before he was sent for, and found me still on the footstool at his cousin's feet. I had been thinking so much and so anxiously about Doctor Mark and Hannah, that I felt I would rather be left to myself for the present than get up and listen to the ardent love making of the man through whom I was going to stab these faithful friends so cruelly. But my new lover was not disposed, in weak indulgence of any mood of mine, to forego his prerogative, and having by a simple look lured me to his side, he drew me to the far end of the room, and finding a cosy little sofa that just held us both, began to talk to me very earnestly and seriously about our future.

"I abhor long engagements," he said, in a decided tone; "and in this case, there is every possible reason against such folly. The old woman evidently wants to hurry matters herself;

between ourselves, *carina*, I don't think she is long for this world. She is also, as you must see plainly, so set upon uniting us two, that it would not surprise her to hear to-night that we had made up our minds to oblige her in the matter. Anyhow, a very few days will suffice to save appearances; and once she is informed of our engagement, we can have a quiet and private marriage almost immediately. My wild rose is so sweet and fair," he added, probably detecting a look of astonishment and rebellion on my face, "that I shall have no rest or peace till I have secured her for my own for ever. Ah! my little cold mountain flower! you have no idea, with all your pretty tendrilm and romance, what it is to love passionately and desperately as I do."

And, as he chose to exemplify this sentiment by an embrace that nearly took my breath away, I could only very feebly protest against his original suggestion, adding timidly (for it is an odd truth, that the man I so blindly loved, always, from the beginning, half frightened me), that I

must obtain the consent of my guardian, Miss Beresford, before I could finally accede to any hurried measure whatever ; moreover, that I doubted whether this consent, even to my engagement, would be at all easy to secure.

Then the countenance, which I was studying anxiously, lowered and darkened perceptibly, and after a brief pause, Edmund said, almost in a hard voice, and with his teeth a little too firmly set—

“That woman, at any rate, sha’n’t baffle me. Don’t mention her to me again as an even possible hindrance to our speedy union, *carina*. It would be an excellent plan, Mrs. Trevanion approving, to be married first—you are of age—and only tell these carping people, who want to keep you all to themselves, about it afterwards. What say you, my sweet Rosebud? Will you give me this little token that you really love me, and can make a small sacrifice for my happiness?”

It was a wild and startling proposition, and one from which every instinct of my nature re-

volted ; but with those dark eyes (capable of taking into them depths of tenderness at will) looking into mine, I knew too surely that judgment, right feeling, all in fact, but the love which yields its very self to the voice of the charmer, would be lulled to sleep ; and so, by a sudden movement, for which my companion was unprepared, I got away from him and his beguiling eyes, stood erect at a safe distance from him, and told him I had conceded quite enough for one day, and that I was now going to ring for tea and arouse Mrs. Trevanion.

As it happened, the old lady was already awake, and quite aware that her young friends were making the best of their time at the other end of the room. She smiled, and nodded significantly to me as I advanced, with rather guilty blushes, towards her, and then calling Edmund, she informed him that I could sing like a woodland bird, and that after tea he must get me to the piano.

Whether Edmund really appreciated music or

not, I have no idea. I only know that for the rest of the evening he hung over me, in apparent raptures, as I played and sang to him, taking advantage of every interlude to whisper anew the subtle temptation which had frightened me from the sofa, and to swear to me that anything less than this would leave him in miserable doubt as to the reality of my love.

The last song I sang to him was poor Mark's "Douglas," and because I was tired, and had been over excited throughout the day, I broke down in the middle, remembering with a sudden pang that I had forfeited for ever my right both to the smile and the love of the friend, who through patient years had been to me so "tender and true."

Edmund, not having the key to my secret feelings, thought he had wearied and offended me by his importunities, and as I did not contradict him, he overwhelmed me with his apologies, his affectionate attentions, and his lover-like as-

siduities generally. I began to hope that this fortunate accident had released me finally from an ordeal that might in the end have been too much for me, and when I went back to Mrs. Trevanion's chair, my eyes were dry, and I could answer truthfully to her somewhat anxious question that I had passed a very happy evening.

"Then go to bed now, my weary Rosebud," she said, kindly; "for I want you to be very fresh and bright to-morrow, and Edmund and myself have some business matters to discuss that will keep me up another hour. Take Malcolm with you; I shall not want her services till long after you have dismissed her."

In parting, Edmund pressed and held my hand openly and suggestively, saying, in an undisguisedly tender voice—

"The hours will drag heavily with me till the Rosebud comes forth in her sweetness and fragrance again. I owe my honoured cousin many serious obligations, but the deepest debt of grati-

tude of which I am conscious, is for her goodness in procuring for me and sanctioning the rare happiness I have enjoyed to-day."

If there was anything in this rather stilted speech which momentarily offended my taste, I reconciled myself to it by the argument that Edmund had a difficult part to play, and that in his eagerness to have our engagement known and ratified, he might naturally a little overdo the thing, striving, for my sake more than his own to save appearances.

CHAPTER III.

A CLOSER VIEW OF MY DREAM HERO.

IN spite of what Mrs. Trevanion had said, I had no intention of ringing for Malcolm that night ; but she came into my room, as she had often done before, without a special summons, and asked, with quite a wistful look in her grave face, if she might not help to undress me. According to her this permission, I debated within myself (not for the first time since the scene in the conservatory) whether I might venture to take Charles Trevanion's devoted friend and partisan into my confidence, telling her at least so much of the

truth as should quiet her mind in reference to the future of her darling, and at the same time letting her see that I was not the fickle, inconsistent being she would otherwise deem me as soon as the relations between Mr. Trevanion and myself became known to the household.

I did not doubt that Edmund would disapprove of my imparting our secret to a servant; but, then, in the first place he was not aware, as I was, that Mrs. Malcolm was no ordinary domestic, —that, independently of her unshaken fidelity to her mistress's son, she was a Christian woman, and worthy of the most perfect trust; in the second place, he had given me no distinct prohibition, except as regarded Mrs. Trevanion; and in the third and last place, I was a girl, and had a girl's natural longing to speak to somebody of the great and important interests that had so abruptly come into my life, and the utter concealment of which, even for a short period, would be a real grief and weariness to me.

So while good Mrs. Malcolm very softly and

tenderly brushed my hair, I revealed to her the marvellous tidings that Mr. Edmund Trevanion and myself had met before to-day; that he was, in fact, the person I had referred to when I told her that Sunday morning in the carriage of my heart being already disposed of; that he had spoken openly to me now, and that in the event of our obtaining the consent of my guardian, I should probably one day become his wife. After this (no other comment than a startled "Oh!" being offered), I went on to say that Edmund had given me a faithful promise to restore to Charles the larger part of his inheritance as soon as he came into possession of it; I called upon Charles's nurse to applaud the nobility and magnanimity of this resolve, and I wound up by an earnest, solemn injunction as to the inviolate secrecy Mrs. Malcolm must observe on all the points concerning which I had enlightened her. Then I took the brush out of her hitherto unresting hand, turned my eager face up to hers, and waited for my companion to speak.

But this did not occur for a minute or so, during which I grew impatient, looking in vain for some token in that placid countenance that my news had filled the good woman's heart with rejoicing. At last I said, a little pettishly—

“ Well, Mrs. Malcolm, are you not delighted at the prospect for your adored Mr. Charles—does it not exceed your utmost expectations? I am sure not one man in ten thousand would do as Mr. Trevanion is so generously and unselfishly proposing doing.”

This drew forth a reply, but it was spoken in a voice fully as quiet and depressed as usual—

“ I humbly thank you, my dear young lady, for all you have been good enough to trust me with. I was just thinking it sounded more like one of the tales I used to read out of a story book when I was a girl than anything I have met with in real life. I am only a poor untaught woman, and it's not for me to give an opinion as to the doings of my betters and superiors; but you have always been so kind and condescending

to me, and I have been bold enough to take so warm an interest in your welfare, that you must not be angry with me, miss, if I venture to say I cannot help having uneasy feelings about secrets and concealments where young gentlemen are in question ; not that this Mr. Trevanion is so very young either, but—you'll excuse me, my dear young lady—he hasn't the frank open look of poor Mr. Charles, and the thought that disturbs me is, why, having known you before, should he be afraid of stating as much to Mrs. Trevanion, or to all the world, for that matter ?”

“ My good Mrs. Malcolm,” I answered, loftily (hiding the impatience I really felt), “ it must surely occur to you that a gentleman who has mixed extensively in the world, and who is not, as you say yourself, quite a boy, may have fifty innocent reasons for exercising the virtue of caution that would on the surface be incomprehensible to you or me. As I am sure you are both sincere and earnest in your own views, I will go so far as to confess that I don't, as a rule,

admire mysteries of any kind myself; but I do think that a man who can deliberately propose giving up to another the larger part of a magnificent property which is legally his own, may safely be trusted to have nothing to hide from the world that would debase him in the world's opinion. He cannot help," I added, a little sarcastically, "not having a strong personal resemblance to your Mr. Charles; but I don't see that he is to be set down as a suspicious character on this account. You mean well, my good Mrs. Malcolm, and I am sincerely obliged to you for your kind interest in my welfare; but there is such a thing as straining at a gnat, and it may be that you are falling into this error in allowing yourself to be uneasy because Mr. Trevanion does not open his heart on all subjects to the lady who, until to-day, was a stranger to him."

Admirable sophistry, that ought to have impressed and convinced far more enlightened minds than the one I had to deal with, but Malcolm only sighed resignedly and observed—

“ Perhaps it is as you say, miss. We are all apt to make mistakes, especially, I am afraid, in our judgment of our fellow creatures, and of course you have kind friends and relations who will know a deal better than I can do whether this gentleman is, in all respects, a suitable partner for you. I don’t deny, my dear young lady,” added the worthy creature, in quite a tremulous voice, for I believe she was very timid of giving offence, “ that the promises about Mr. Charles and the money are extremely fair sounding, and, if they could be relied on, would make the other matter we don’t quite agree about seem trifling and unimportant; but oh, miss, it’s easy to promise and very hard to human nature to perform, when self-denial has to be exercised, and above all when it’s a question of money being given up. Why, I have known even Christians, God’s own dear children, fail here; and how can we expect mere worldlings to abide the test?”

“ You blow hot and cold, Mrs. Malcolm,” I

said indignantly, for all her remarks had displeased me, especially those which related to the opinion of my friends as to Mr. Trevanion's suitability to me. "The other day you seemed to think it natural enough that, under judicious influence, Mrs. Trevanion's heir should forego his rights in favour of his banished cousin, and now you speak as if such an act of heroism would be impossible, although I have told you (to set your mind at rest) that a distinct promise to that effect has been given me."

Again the irritating sigh, accompanied by a humble, deprecating look, prefaced her words, as Mrs. Malcolm said—

"I had not seen Mr. Trevanion then, miss, nor heard what you have this night confided to me, but I have been overbold in all my remarks, I am afraid, and aroused your anger, when my wish was only to speak true and honest words for your private consideration. I will wish you good night now, miss, humbly begging your pardon for any offence I have given, and assuring

you that every sentence that has passed between us will be as safe with me as it would be in the grave."

"Very well, Mrs. Malcolm," I replied, abating my dignity but a little, "I trust you implicitly, and I hope the time will soon come when *you* will learn to place a rather firmer trust in *my* judgment, and in the honour of the gentleman whose only fault, as far as I can see, consists in the untoward circumstance of his not resembling Mr. Charles."

Thus we parted, Mrs. Malcolm being far too well trained a servant, as well as too sensible a woman, to attempt defending herself, otherwise than by retreat, from the arrows I was hurling at her head. She left me, however, with a keener arrow rankling in my own flesh—a thoroughly revolted feeling in reference to the cruel suspiciousness of human nature in general, and a torturing doubt (suggested by what had just passed) as to whether, all things duly weighed, I should ever obtain Hannah Beres-


ford's sanction to my marriage with Edmund Trevanion. She had hated and mistrusted him as Ernest Paget; she would hate and mistrust him still more as the usurper of his cousin's rights; and since I was forbidden to reveal the only thing that could clear his character—making it shine forth as the sun at noon day—she would naturally share Mrs. Malcolm's feelings with regard to the little mystery involved in his first introduction to us, and create no end of gigantic mountains out of this harmless little molehill.

There was, of course, my old unfailing refuge in every trouble or difficulty—Doctor Mark. He might possibly succeed in influencing his sister, in calming her overstrained apprehensions, in setting aside her doubts, and finally in winning her consent to letting me be happy in my own way; but with the knowledge I had so recently acquired on the subject of Doctor Mark's own sentiments, how could I ever gather courage to go to him as a passionate pleader on behalf of another man? Thinking it over calmly, as I lay

tossing on a sleepless bed, it seemed to me that such a course on my part would be wholly heartless and unnatural; that it would be even easier and better to do as Edmund wished, risking the one fierce storm that would certainly assail me when I had decided my own fate, instead of encountering the vexatious, harassing, and exhausting squalls that would of necessity be experienced if I placed the ordering of that fate, in ever so guarded a manner, in Hannah Beresford's hands.

When at last I dropped, from utter weariness, into a feverish sleep, my mind had got into such a hopeless and bewildering state of chaos, that I was quite incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, and I had almost come to the conclusion that the thorns in my beautiful garden of love were more numerous than the roses.

But awaking the next morning with the sun shining brilliantly into my room, the birds shouting joyously outside my windows, and the



delicious hope of another long day with Edmund thrilling through my whole being, all things wore a different aspect, and when Malcolm came in to bring her mistress's love, and a request that I would make breakfast for Mr. Trevanion, she being quite unable to rise, I felt far too happy to be otherwise than very friendly with the good woman from whom I had parted in displeasure.

"Oh! Mrs. 'Malcolm,'" I exclaimed, springing up in bed, and rubbing my still sleepy eyes, "I hope I am not very late, or that if I am Mr. Trevanion won't be wanting his breakfast very early. Do you know whether he has been called yet, and by-the-bye, how is your mistress after her exertions of yesterday? I am so afraid she overdid it."

"And will overdo it again, miss," said the faithful servant, with a solemn oscillation of the head. "She is as weak and shaky as she can be this morning, but the doctor isn't to be sent for, and she is all impatience to be up and downstairs again with you and the gentleman."

As for Mr. Trevanion, he has been down, and writing letters in the library this half-hour. Can I do anything to help you forward, miss?"

Declining her services I hurried over my dressing—not, however, without a little extra fastidiousness with the last touches, and a little unusual lingering at my glass when all was done, and then I went straight into the pretty morning room I had begun to call my own, because I had so long had it to myself,—and having made both tea and coffee and seen that everything was as dainty and nice as possible, including a vase of lovely hot-house flowers in the centre of the table, I rang the bell and desired the footman who answered it to tell Mr. Trevanion that breakfast was waiting for him.

I have shown my reader quite enough of Edmund Trevanion's style of wooing to make it unnecessary to give a detailed account of his greeting this morning. It will be sufficient to say that it more than satisfied my requirements, and that again and again during the progress of

the meal I had to recall his attention to the substantial creature comforts placed before him, as well as to remind him that even our engagement had not been published yet, and that our being alone together at all was a thing that would ill accord with my guardian's strict notions of propriety.

The next moment I had cause to repent this indiscreet allusion, for in quite a sharp, irascible voice, Edmund exclaimed—

“Hang your guardian! I am sick of hearing about her notions, and I asked you yesterday, my dear child, not to thrust her down my throat again.”

The last clause was in a milder tone, for I had flushed hotly at his angry excitement, and he had promptly recovered his temper, but it left rather a sore impression on my mind, requiring Edmund's utmost tact and management to soothe me into a happy mood again.

Perhaps it was in consequence of this that he did not say much on the subject he had been so

warm upon the previous evening. He told me, however, before I left the breakfast table, that he had prepared Mrs. Trevanion for a speedy declaration of his own sentiments, if not a full avowal of our mutual understanding. The old lady, he added, was too anxious to see him safely married to a wife of her choosing to be otherwise than delighted at the prompt success of her matchmaking scheme. He was quite sure, if she anticipated any difficulty or even delay from the scruples of my relatives, she would be the first to urge a quick and private union without taking them into our counsels beforehand. But here I stopped him with, I flatter myself, some creditable attempt at dignity—

“That is a point for *my* consideration,” I said, “not for Mrs. Trevanion’s, or even yours, primarily. It seems to me that you are too much inclined to regard me as a puppet in the whole affair, a mere dancing doll whose strings you can pull, and whose actions command at your own will and pleasure. This is the agreeable price I

have to pay for having lent too ready an ear to a stranger's wooing. I clearly recognize my error now, thanks to your teaching, but it is not too late to amend it."

"What do you mean, you pretty little shrew?" he answered, with a face of real alarm, and detaining me, with tender force, as I was about to leave the room. "You know, my sweet Rosebud, I have no will but yours, or if I had that I would sacrifice it a hundred times over rather than have those dear blue eyes look coldly or unlovingly upon me. Come, let us kiss and be friends, and it shall have its own sweet way in everything, even to the length of going to its cruel tyrant of a guardian and asking her consent to its becoming Mrs. Edmund Trevanion of the Priory."

As I could not help laughing at the ridiculous tone he assumed, though I was indignant at the same time at being treated like a baby, I had to make it up with my professedly repentant lover, and even to give him the fragment of a

hope (for if a woman in such cases concedes a little, she is tolerably sure to be made to concede a great deal) that I would at least think over his suggestion of being married first, and asking permission afterwards ; also this man who had constituted himself my master won a promise from me to let him speak openly to Mrs. Trevanion of our attachment in two or three days. And then I left him to his own devices, more than half ashamed of my utter weakness, and resolved on not trusting myself in his society again until Mrs. Trevanion could make one of the party.


CHAPTER IV.

THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST ME.

THE winged flight of time to happy lovers is a thing that poets have treated too felicitously and skilfully for mere prose writers to have anything new to say on the subject. For the few days immediately succeeding the one I have last spoken about, I trod upon perfumed air, feasted upon ambrosia, and looked through golden gates into a still fairer paradise than that which Edmund Trevanion's devotion had already opened to me—for as his wife, with nothing to conceal, with no apprehensions flitting across the bright summer

of my contentment, in reference to a possibility of future separation from him, I believed I should be wholly and entirely blessed, that my cup of human happiness would be filled to overflowing. In one word, I had become a fool, in a weak and sinful prostration of soul and body before a mortal shrine, and I naturally paid the price of my folly in seeing none of the real dangers which lurked in my brilliant pathway, and which wise men and women would have seen and avoided.

Mrs. Trevanion did not, after that first morning, allow Edmund and myself much opportunity of being alone together, but it came to nearly the same thing, as whether strolling with us in the grounds, driving along the country roads, or sitting quietly at home, the old lady was not only in pretence, but actually, either so drowsy, so absent, or so mentally preoccupied, that she saw next to nothing of what was going on around her; and the little she did observe, from time to time, evidently pleased her well. That her own health was suffering seriously under some fierce



inward excitement, even more than from her unwonted physical exertions, was a fact neither Malcolm nor myself could doubt, but nobody could do anything towards remedying this evil, since the proud old woman acknowledged no ailments, asked no sympathy, and professed to be happier and cheerfuller than she had been for many years.

When I spoke to Edmund about his relative's unsatisfactory state (for Malcolm was continually urging it on *my* notice, and suggesting the gloomiest consequences), he said lightly that she would be much better when once she knew of our engagement, that he believed she was harassing herself with absurd fears—he was thankful they *were* absurd—that, after all her scheming, something might yet go wrong. I did not agree with him, because Malcolm had infected me with her own views, which associated her mistress's restlessness and mental fever with conscience and natural yearnings; but I told him (this was after he had been about five days at the Priory), that

he might speak to Mrs. Trevanion now as soon as he liked. I would leave the coast clear for him by going to my own room an hour earlier than usual in the evening.

I slept as well as ever that night. I did not look upon this avowal to Mrs. Trevanion of what must have been quite apparent to her before, as *the* important move in our yet unwon game. The old lady would congratulate us, would possibly confess to me that she had planned the whole affair, would agree that some definite step in relation to my friends at Yarvil must now be taken, would perhaps advise the rash course—her judgment not being in its full strength just now—which Edmund was so wildly anxious for, but here her part in the matter must of necessity end. It was for me—me myself—Jessie Seton—to strike the final *coup*, to decide upon meanly deceiving and betraying the generous friends of long and trusting years, or to risk everything by going boldly to them, and asking their approval of my marriage

with a stranger, and a man whom, one of them, at least, had judged and condemned already.

And yet, because my mind was still quite unmade up about this all-important move, and because happiness, when one gets large doses of it, is physically exhausting, I slept well that night, and had no dreams to warn me that any special trial or temptation was near at hand.

Malcolm brought me word early the following morning that her mistress would like me to take my breakfast with her in her own room. Mr. Trevanion was going up to London by the first train, and would not be back till quite late at night. I wondered a good deal, as I dressed myself, what this sudden journey meant, wondered whether Mrs. Trevanion would enlighten me on the subject, but finally, having heard from Malcolm that her lady was looking miserably ill and worn this morning, went into her presence with an anxiety of which, for the moment, she was the sole object.

Very kindly and affectionately my hostess and

friend received me, making light of those symptoms of bodily suffering which her aspect unquestionably betrayed, (and on account of which I expressed the sincere concern I felt,) assuring me she should be quite herself after her chocolate, making Malcolm draw the little table laid with my breakfast close to her bed, and then rather peremptorily desiring her watchful attendant to leave us to ourselves, and not to come in again till she was rung for.

"And now, Rosebud," she said, as the door finally closed upon us, "you and I are going to have a nice little talk of a strictly private nature. You may kiss me first, and raise my pillows a trifle higher, as I do not get my breath quite easily this morning, and I have a good many things to say. Thanks, my love—that will do excellently. It is pleasant to feel that I have a sort of claim upon your offices of friendship now; that it is my own little cousin in embryo who is dispensing them so cheerfully, and that once this title is established, nobody in all

the world will have the right to take you away from me. For I have grown very fond of my pretty Rosebud," she added, in a tone that struck me painfully as almost childish, "and I could ill afford to lose her while this poor frail body of mine still cumpers the ground."

Pausing here to regain the breath she had just complained of, Mrs. Trevanion drew my crimsoning face close to her own, looking into it with such an odd, searching, unnatural expression in her eagle eyes, that I quite shrank before it, whereupon she laughed and let me go, saying—

"I only wanted to find out what amount of courage and resolution my gentle Rosebud is gifted with. It is not a great deal I am afraid, but still it may be enough to secure her own and somebody else's happiness. Nay, no more blushes, sweet; I don't forget that I was young and happy once myself, though that alas! is a long and a weary time ago; but with you, child, it is summer and sunshine now, and you will act wisely in making the most of it while the bright,

brief season lasts. Edmund has told me everything, Jessie—he is devoted to you with his whole heart and soul, and I have promised him to get your consent to an immediate and strictly private marriage before those officious guardians of yours can interfere. They have no legal power over you, as, of course, you are aware, and their opposition would only make you unhappy and unsettled, and annoy us all. I don't see on what grounds they *could* object to bestow you on a gentleman so unexceptionable in all respects as my cousin Trevanion, who, in addition to his personal merits, will by-and-bye be one of the richest men in England; but Edmund tells me you apprehend the possibility of it, and re-calling some curious observations of my own the first day we met, I have a dim glimmering of light on the subject. Beresford is a good man, and a clever doctor. I don't deny that I owe him more than my regulation guineas, though multiplied by thousands, would ever adequately pay, but he must not be unreasonable for all


this : he must not expect me to encourage him in appropriating to himself a jewel which one on a higher level would more graciously wear. Ah ! my breath, Rosebud, my ill-mannered breath, that will not let me say the half that is in my heart. Give me my chocolate, dear child, and then tell me you have followed me in all my remarks, and that you will put no weak hindrance in the way of Edmund's happiness and mine. He is gone to London expressly to buy the licence to-day."

I was tolerably prepared, as the reader has been informed, for all but this last startling announcement, but my utmost expectations in reference to the influence that would be exerted over me had not reached to the point of an actual conspiracy, and my first feeling, on hearing what had been the object of Mr. Trevanion's sudden journey to London, was one of warm and undisguised indignation, causing me to speak a few angry and bitter words, and to exhibit another specimen of the abominable Scotch

pride for which Mrs. Trevanion had once before reproached me.

The old lady, however, took my outbreak this time with extraordinary mildness. She even admitted that Edmund's zeal, as a lover, had made him a little premature and indiscreet in deciding to go for a licence without gaining my consent to such a step; but after this, seeing that I cooled down quickly, and was willing to judge leniently an error which had sprung out of too impetuous and too ardent a love for myself, the crafty old woman entirely changed her tactics, and began suddenly to weep bitterly, to declare that she was a miserable heart-broken creature, and that it only required the failure of this, her latest hope, to hurry her to her grave, which indeed she wished had long ago taken her to its friendly shelter.

Of course these tears and lamentations were extremely painful and harassing to me, more especially as I felt sure they would make the nerve-shattered old lady very ill, and probably





necessitate the sending for Doctor Beresford. I tried by turns every art of soothing I had at command, kissed her, stroked gently the grey hairs (which alas ! were a poor crown of glory to their world-hardened possessor), told her that we were not by any means certain of my guardian raising obstacles to my marriage with her cousin ; and finally, when all this signally failed, and the tears and weak bemoanings, growing more and more childish and unreasonable, continued, gave her a hasty promise that I would think over her wishes, and discuss the whole matter seriously with Edmund as soon as he returned. Then she became calm, dried her tears, insisted on my finishing my breakfast (oblivious of the fact that she had quite destroyed my appetite for it), and consented to lay her own shaking head quietly back on her pillows while I tried to obey her.

I left her in another half hour, as she appeared sleepy, and our private talk for the present was at an end. It was a relief to me to get out into the pure morning air, to smell the flowers, to

listen to the happy birds, who had no distracting cases of conscience to sadden their joyous songs, and to take brisk exercise in the most secluded alleys where I could think without interruption, and uninfluenced, for the moment, by the presence and voice of the man who had cast such a fatal spell over me, and whose slave I knew myself to be.

When I went indoors at the usual luncheon hour, Malcolm was waiting to tell me that her mistress was too ill to leave her bed at all, and that a telegram had been received from Mr. Trevanion, saying that he could not possibly be back that night.

So here was I with a long afternoon and evening to get through quite alone, my solitude haunted by meditations of anything but a cheerful kind, and the terrifying possibility of Doctor Mark arriving at any moment sitting, like a nightmare, upon my guilty heart. It was easy to forget the whole world, and to revel luxuriously in my fool's paradise while Edmund was with me; but I soon found that, the immediate



atmosphere of his devotion withdrawn, I no longer breathed with perfect freedom, that the air around me had a leaven of dank, unwholesome vapour amidst the bright, ethereal, perfumed essence, with which it had recently been so abundantly charged.

But the afternoon wore away, and Doctor Mark did not appear. I sat gloomily in the little morning room, trying nearly every occupation by turns, but ending in watching dreamily the lengthening shadows on the lawn, and wishing that night would come. First of all, however, came Malcolm again with the report that Mrs. Trevanion was no better, and that she had half a mind to send for the doctor without her mistress's knowledge or permission. I trembled inwardly as the woman spoke, and said, what was indeed the truth, that I believed Mrs. Trevanion would be excessively angry if such a step was taken on Malcolm's own responsibility, though of course if the case was really urgent I would advise the risk.

“ Well, you see, miss,” said the anxious servant, “ I know for certain it is all on the mind, and no doctor in the world can physic a sick soul. My poor mistress has had a desperate struggle with her heart and conscience, and though she seems to have beat, it has left her half dead herself, and with her intellects, I am afraid”—this in a lower voice—“ not quite so clear as they were before. In fact, miss, she appears to me to be wandering strangely in her speech to-day, and this is what frightens me, and made me think of sending for the doctor ; but perhaps we had better wait a bit. The gentleman will be back to-morrow, and he will decide on what is to be done.”

“ Oh yes,” I said eagerly, wishing with my whole heart he were here now, “ that will be our wisest plan, Mrs. Malcolm. Has your mistress mentioned me since I was with her this morning.”

“ Why she talks of little else, miss,” was the prompt reply. “ Her mind is set on seeing you

married to Mr. Edmund, and from some words I caught when she was half asleep and dreaming, I fancy she is afraid your people will even now prevent it. If I might make so bold, miss, I would advise your soon letting them know what is going on, for I believe if the matter was once settled, my poor lady might get a little easier again."

"And have you any idea, Mrs. Malcolm," I asked, "why Mrs. Trevanion's heart should be so strongly set on this thing? I believe she likes me, but not sufficiently to account for her extraordinary anxiety to see me married to her consin. I have been thinking of it all, you see, this afternoon, and I confess myself fairly puzzled."

"I have thought a good deal of it too, miss," said Malcolm confidentially, "and I have come to the belief that, in her restlessness and misery of mind and conscience, the poor lady feels the need of some excitement that may for awhile drive remorse and reflection away. She is fond of you, no doubt, and she argues that there will

be no fear of Mr. Edmund doing like poor Mr. Charles if she gets him safely married to a lady born, before she dies. It may even be, too, that the mother's heart pleading sometimes against her pride and obstinacy, she wants to put it out of her power to listen to the first, by a further showing to the world,—such as marrying Mr. Edmund to a wife of her own choice would be—that she has not repented her first harshness.”

“Very probably you are right, Mrs. Malcolm,” I answered, with a passing wonder at this untaught woman's acuteness; “but suppose my friends should persist in refusing their consent to my marrying Mr. Trevanion, do you think it would really very seriously distress your mistress?”

“I think, in her present fevered state of mind, it would kill her, or make her quite childish again,” replied Malcolm, without a moment's hesitation; “but they ought not to be kept in ignorance for all this, and I can't help wishing the Doctor, who is one of the kindest and best of

gentlemen, would come over, and set everything straight."

Alas ! my own conviction was that if Doctor Mark came over now the setting straight process would never be accomplished. And pondering deeply over all the honest Malcolm had said, when she once more left me to myself, I came to the determination that further struggling against the stream was useless, that everything was urging me to the one desperate course, and that to-morrow I would make my lover happy, and give relief to Mrs. Trevanion's tempest-tossed mind by agreeing to a private marriage as soon as they liked to fix it.

But the morrow, when it came, had other work for me.

CHAPTER V.

A GOOD WOMAN'S INFLUENCE.

THE restless and excited state of my mind gave me little chance of sleeping that night, and I got up in the morning long before I was usually called, and went down into the garden to try the effect of the cool air upon a heated brain, and the soothing influence of nature upon an uneasy conscience.

It was very early, and only one or two sleepy servants were about, moving lazily in the performance of their duties, and looking at me (as I descended into the hall) as if they wondered what

sudden craze had tempted me to leave a comfortable bed full two hours before there was any necessity for my doing so. I, in my turn, wondered how strong, healthy girls, who could make a hardship of having to rise with the lark on a warm spring morning, would behave themselves in a position like mine, or endure the weight of that vast load of responsibility I was now carrying on my poor feeble little shoulders.

But once out on the bright dewy lawn, with no human presence near me, I ceased to think of anybody beyond the immediate actors in the strange life drama that was being played before my eyes, and in which I was one of the principal performers. I felt miserably weighed down by my present inevitable loneliness both of resolve and action. I wanted Edmund to return and talk me into good humour with myself, by persuading me that I was doing rightly, kindly, and generously in consenting to his own and Mrs. Trevanion's wishes. My own unaided reflections failed this morning to satisfy me entirely on the

point. When I tried to think most of Edmund and Mrs. Trevanion Doctor Mark and Hannah *would* come into the foreground, asserting, with a steady, though always unreproachful persistency, their older and dearer claims. And when I thrust them back and brought the other actors into their places, the sadness and tender mournfulness of Doctor Mark's aspect smote me with a pang none the less bitter that I could not feel it undeserved.

But I did succeed at last in arguing myself into a belief that I had gone too far to retract, and that when I had once seen Edmund again, and given my promise to him and to Mrs. Trevanion, I should recover my composure, and arm my frightened spirit to meet courageously the consequences of the act I had resolved upon.

Then I took a brisk half running walk round the shrubberies, gathered some fragrant lilac boughs to carry to Mrs. Trevanion when she should send for me, and finally turned back and went down the chestnut avenue to meet the postman, and to receive from him (to my immense

astonishment and delight) a letter addressed to myself in Edmund's well known hand.

It was very short, and evidently written in a great hurry. I must forgive this, he said, in consideration of his having found so much to do on his arrival in London. Mrs. Trevanion had wished him to see his lawyer and get a settlement drawn up on my behalf. The matter was somewhat a difficult one, as it referred chiefly to property not yet his own, but he felt bound to obey his good cousin's instructions to the letter—and was it not a profound joy to him to take any trouble that might ultimately benefit his darling Jessie, his sweet little wife that was soon to be? This introduced the real object of the brief, though lever-like, epistle. Might he hope, if he brought down the license, that I would consent to a private marriage in Wallington Church, two days after he should be with me again? He had an admirable excuse for urging such apparently inconsiderate haste in the necessity (only just made known to him) of his having to return to

the Continent in less than a week on business of the greatest importance, and that would admit of no delay. He wrote, he said, to give me a few additional hours in which to think it all over, and because he fondly trusted that I should then receive him in the evening with the assurance of my full consent to crown his dearest wishes.

Having read this tender effusion for a second and a third time with kindling cheeks and a throbbing heart, I sat down on the hard roots of the tree under whose leafy shade I had received my treasure, and closing my eyes, the better to shut out all external influences, told myself that the die was finally cast, and that for weal or woe, I must bind my life and destiny to those of the man who had won me first by a look, and whose passionate entreaty I was therefore little likely for any lengthened period to withstand.

How long I sat on my rough seat trying to realise the astounding fact that in less than three days I should, of my own free will, become a wedded wife—the wife of Edmund Trevanion,

a person almost a stranger to me, and only accepted and trusted in virtue of the rash uncalculating love he had inspired, I have no idea. I only know that I was beginning to feel the sun's rays strike too hotly on my uncovered head, and to wonder whether time had actually, or only in my imagination, been standing still, when looking up suddenly, I saw Mrs. Malcolm coming with a very unwonted quickness of step in my direction, and that then I got up and walked absently and dreamily to meet her.

The good woman had been seeking me everywhere for the last half hour at least. She was evidently both uncomfortable and alarmed, and, though she did not say so, I believe she had begun to fear that I was "over the hills and far away," my escapade not wholly unconnected with a certain gentleman whose merits she was as yet somewhat sceptical about. But her immediate apprehensions allayed, she began telling me, with a voice of anxious concern, what a dreadful night her poor mistress had passed, how

much more feverish and irritable, and queer altogether she was this morning, and how vexatious it was that she still obstinately, and even violently, insisted on not having Dr. Beresford sent for.

"Perhaps I shall persuade her to see him, or somebody else," I said, with a real spasm at my coward heart at the bare thought of Doctor Mark coming to the Priory within the next three days. "Has not Mrs. Trevanion got some London physician who could be telegraphed for in an emergency? I think I have heard Dr. Beresford speak of such a person."

"My mistress has had nobody of late years but Dr. Beresford," replied Malcolm, in quite distressing perplexity; "but there is a very clever gentleman in London who used to attend her. It might be as well for you, miss, to mention what you have thought of later in the day; but she feels too exhausted from her bad night to have you up yet. She desired me to give her kind love, and to say she hoped you had quite

made up your mind to oblige her in the matter she spoke about to you yesterday morning. I am sure if it is anything that will soothe the poor soul, and that is agreeable to your own conscience, miss, I hope you will do it, humbly asking your pardon for my boldness of speech. And will you come in now, my dear young lady, and have your breakfast? You must be nearly starving."

We had been standing during our brief dialogue in the spot where I had come up to Mrs. Malcolm, but now I walked on mechanically at her side, oppressed beyond my strength by the overwhelming tide of my own thoughts, and feeling that at all risks I must have somebody to share them and to encourage me (as I believed this worthy creature would, in view of her mistress's state) in acting promptly upon my latest convictions both as to right and necessity.

So, during our leisurely progress towards the house, I took heart of grace, and told my intently listening companion exactly how I was

situated, not even hiding from her the substance of the letter I had just received, but dwelling chiefly on Mrs. Trevanion's importunities, and on my own fear that my friends at Yarvil would put numberless obstacles in the way of the contemplated marriage.

When I began my story I did not doubt that Malcolm, in her sick lady's interest, would urge me to a compliance with Mrs. Trevanion's wishes ; before I had finished it, something in the woman's face, which became graver and graver as I spoke, warned me that I might have reckoned without my host, and reminded me that the counsellor I had chosen was a person of stern and uncompromising principle.

But I could not draw back now, and whatever this involuntary recipient of my strange confidence had to say, I must perforce remain by her side to listen to it.

Her first words were in themselves sufficiently startling.

" You would not sell your soul, my dear young

lady," she said, in a low, emphatic voice, "for gold or gain. Why should you sell it for a man's love, or a woman's tears; the first no better able than the last to make up to you for what you would have parted with."

"Oh! Mrs. Malcolm," I exclaimed, trembling, half with undefined fear and half with indignation, at her unnecessary solemnity, "you should not put the matter in such a terrible light. The Beresfords are not my parents, nor even my near kindred, and I am in no way *bound* to obey or consult them."

"I think you are," she said, unhesitatingly, "seeing that they have stood to you in the stead of parents, and close kindred. Miss Beresford is, as you have told me yourself, the guardian appointed by your dead mother to look after you, and attend to your interests in this world and the next; and anyone could find out with half an eye, having seen you and the good doctor together, that no child nor sister could be more precious to him than you are, which is a natural

consequence, my dear young lady, of his having had a pretty winsome creature like you living in his home and growing up, as one may say, under his very shadow. Oh! my dear," she added, with additional earnestness, and seeming to forget the difference between our social ranks as she warmed with her subject, "don't let an angel, if such a thing could be, persuade you to act against your conscience, and your own better feelings. Go to your friends at Yarvil, and tell them the whole matter. They won't refuse you anything on which you have set your heart, if so be they know nothing against this Mr. Edmund. The gentleman being away, and Mrs. Trevanion ill, you have an opportunity that may never occur again. Do, my dear, listen to a humble servant's advice for once, and believe that Providence has put this chance in your path, and that it would be a sin to neglect it. You can have the carriage immediately after breakfast—my mistress always wishes you to make use of it—and you may be back long before she is likely to ask for you.

Also, you can tell the doctor of her state and symptoms, and he will, I know, understand the poor lady's whims, and call some time to-day or to-morrow, as if to see you, or by accident. You are not angry with me, my dear young lady, and you will take your breakfast hour to consider of my plan, and to make up your mind as to whether you will have the carriage and go to Yarvil."

In the midst of the really bewildering tumult of emotion excited in my already overwrought brain by Mrs. Malcolm's earnest appeal, I was struck by the extraordinary energy this usually calm and timid woman had abruptly developed. I have since then had the observation forced upon me that many habitually vacillating and nervous persons, who would shrink from deciding for themselves the most trivial matters of every-day life, can be bold as lions, and prompt as they are bold, when conscience has once clearly designated to them the right road to pursue.

"My good Mrs. Malcolm," I replied, after a very brief pause to choke down a rebellious sen-

sation in my throat, which had, I believe, been chiefly excited by her allusion to Doctor Mark's tender regard for me, "I cannot be angry with you for speaking according to your own notions of right and wrong, which, as you read your Bible and hymn-book so constantly, are no doubt clearer and juster than mine. Still, you see, it is I, and not you, who have to act in the present case, and what you advise would be so cruelly hard to perform. I might manage to brave Doctor Mark alone—but oh! Mrs. Malcolm, I don't think I *could* face Miss Beresford with the story I should have to tell her. She knows just a little—the least bit in the world—of Mr. Trevanion, and she is sadly prejudiced against him—"

"A stronger reason than ever," interrupted Malcolm the uncompromising, "for your not delaying to put the whole matter before her. Let me be even bolder, my dear young lady, and remind you that neither you nor my poor mistress, who is really nigh upon her second childhood,

know much of this gentleman, who has been living in foreign parts, and says nothing, as far as I can make out, about his doings before we saw him here. Who can tell what his life may have been in a country of papists and ungodly men and women—and you so young and tender, my dear,” added the soft-hearted nurse of Edmund’s deposed cousin, with tears in her meek eyes, “oh! if I could only think of any words that would be powerful enough to persuade you to go and tell everything to your own loving relations—”

“Mrs. Malcolm,” I cried, interrupting her, and speaking with great rapidity, as if the sudden resolution I had adopted, and which astonished myself even more than it could astonish my hearer, “you need not say another syllable. I will do what you advise, not because I have the shadow of a fear that Mr. Trevanion is not worthy of a far better wife than I shall be to him, but because I might hurt Doctor Beresford more seriously by deceiving him than I could endure

afterwards to reflect upon. Please to order the carriage for me as soon as possible, for my courage is so small that it might all ooze away if I had long to wait. Thank you, I do not care about breakfast, but I will go in and take a cup of tea if you make a point of it."

In less than half an hour more I was on my way to Yarvil, with good Mrs. Malcolm's fervent praises of my heroism, and hearty wishes for my success, ringing in my ears, but with an incubus sitting on my affrighted soul, whose weight was threatening to crush the very life out of me.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ORDEAL IN DR. MARK'S STUDY.

My old friend Deb opened the door of Dr. Beresford's house almost before the resounding knock of Mrs. Trevanion's dignified coachman could have penetrated to the lower regions, and in answer to my nearly breathless enquiry as to whether Miss Beresford was at home, replied in a voice of good-natured commiseration—

“ Well, now, only to think that missis should have gone out this morning of every day in the week, when going out early is quite contrary to her usual habits, and you a-riding all this long

way to see her in that most beautiful carriage. It is a right down unfort'nate circumstance, Miss Jessie, and I'm as mad as mad can be about it—more especially as it's to them poor folks at Willow Cottage that missis is gone, and she says to Mariar the last word, 'don't any of you be expecting of me back to lunch' (for since they've bin alone, miss, they've took their dinners together with their teas at six o'clock), but says she to Mariar, be sure you carry up some good strong soup to your master at one o'clock, if so be he is still in the house, which Mariar is a making at this minit, miss, and the smell of the vegetables is quite lovely—but, oh, dear! I'm thinking most of all of your disappointment. Things in this world do happen so contrary."

"Well, it can't be helped, Deb," I said, breaking in upon the excited girl's loquacity, and drawing my breath much more freely already, with a conviction that this accident had been arranged by my good genius as a reward for the extraordinary virtue I was practising, "I did not give

Miss Beresford any hint that I was coming to day, so her being out is quite my own fault. The Doctor is, of course not at home, now, but you said something about his being in the house at one o'clock—is this tolerably certain?"

"Law, bless you, miss, the Doctor's in the house now, and will be right down joyful at seeing you if you'll come in for a bit, and this beautiful carriage and horses won't mind being kep' waiting. The master hasn't been just himself you see, miss, since that nasty horse of his chucked him off on to them hard stones, and he don't go out no more than he can possibly help, though this is to please Miss Hannah and not hisself, for it's easy to find that the Doctor frets and worries with so much stopping at home, and between ourselves, Miss Jessie, neither Mariar nor me likes the looks of him lately at all, he's so dull and melancholy like, and we do say, Mariar and me, that we wishes our young lady hadn't gone away, or would soon come back, for the house ain't like the same house and you not in it, miss,

with your merry laugh and your pretty singing, and so we mopes and mopes, all on us, till we don't know what to be about; and master he's just the wust of the whole lot—and now, if you'd be pleased to step in, miss, I'm sure master will send out a glass of ale to this gentleman as has been a driving of you, and the horses won't take no hurt for a half-hour or so, nor the ilegant car-ridge neither. It ain't much of a compliment, Miss Jessie, but now I comes to have a good look into your face, and your veil took off it, I'm vexed to see you've got no plumper nor rosier at the fine place you've been staying at. Why, your cheeks be as white as a lily, and I'm thinking the doctor 'll be for mixing you up some of his nastiest physio as soon as ever he claps eyes on you."

Nearly every word of poor Deb's last oration had been a separate stab to me, and my white cheeks gave a very faint idea of the inward pain I was enduring. A nice comforter I should prove to Doctor Mark, already ill and depressed, and

according to the testimony of this rough but shrewd member of his household, wanting me in my old place at his fireside to cheer and brighten 'him. Yet there was no help for it now, and this next scene, tragic or otherwise, in the drama, must be played out, whatever secret revolt from her cruel part one of the actors was writhing under.

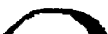
"I will go to Doctor Mark's study at once, Deb," I announced, my knees shaking beneath me as I entered the passage, and my own voice even sounding strange to me; "and as I have a good deal to say to him about my white cheeks," I added, with a feeble attempt at a jest, "don't let any of his patients come in without giving us warning. The carriage will wait for me as long as I am detained here, and you can desire the cook to send some luncheon out to the coachman."

Then I stayed for nothing further, but walked on rapidly and desperately towards the study

door, knocked, with all the resolution I could summon up, and upon the immediate "Come in," turned the handle, and showed my guilty and agitated face upon the threshold.

Doctor Mark was sitting in his accustomed leathern chair by the writing table, which was strewn with books and pamphlets and newspapers and letters in a somewhat untidy fashion. He had a newspaper in his hands now, and before he raised his eyes on my entrance (for he supposed the intruder to be one of the servants, or at most a lagging patient) I had time to observe that he was even paler than when I had seen him last, and looked altogether quite as ill as Deb had represented him.

On the impulse of the discovery I could not help uttering a little cry of commiseration and sympathy as I went swiftly towards his chair, startling him in a manner which showed how weak his usually iron nerves had grown since that unfortunate accident, and leaving me no



choice but to take refuge in the kind eager arms that, with an impulse as sudden as my own, had been opened wide to receive me.


“ My darling Jessie, my own bairn, this is a surprise and a delight I never could have reckoned on. The very sight of your dear face” (kissing it till the whiteness Deb had complained of must have been effectually mended) “ makes me feel twenty years younger and forget the bodily ailments your tender little heart is prepared to sympathise with. Only tell me, my bairn, that you have come to stay with me, never to leave me again, and I shall ask nothing more of earth or heaven for awhile. I shall be happier, my darling, than any feeble words of mine could express to you.”

This was what he said while for a brief minute I hid my face, after he had kissed it, on his shoulder, and amidst the inward passion of compunction and remorse that shook my soul, tried to gain courage and strength for the miserable task before me—the task of smiting the tender

hand that had fostered me from my earliest years; of bruising, if not breaking, the tender heart which had ever held me in his holiest sanctuary.

Extricating myself from Mark's loving arms as a preliminary step, feeling that my time was too short to allow of even a fair amount of considerate circumlocution in my story, I slipped down to a footstool by his chair (humility becoming me best just now) and still leaving my hand in his clasp, replied hurriedly and half chokingly—

“I have not come to stay yet, Doctor Mark, though I shall do that soon, perhaps, for a little while. I have come to you now, however, as a suppliant;—not an unusual thing, you will say—and I want you to give me a kind and a patient hearing. It will hurt me to speak what I am going to speak,” I went on with growing nervousness and increasing quivering of voice, “especially as I find you ill and depressed, and—”




“ Oh, but I am not depressed now, my sweet bairn,” he interrupted eagerly, perhaps to give me leisure to compose myself, and assuredly never dreaming that my supplication could refer to anything of greater importance than a longer leave of absence at some future time, to which Mrs. Trevanion might be tempting me. “ You brought a world of sunbeams in with you, darling, and I am not afraid, though this dear little excited face is threatening me with a rather mysterious revelation, that you will carry them all away with you again. Come, Jessie love, your nerves are not A 1 this morning—scarcely up to much talking. Suppose, therefore, you abandon the narrative style, and submit instead to a mild catechising on my part? What shall we begin with? This formidable hero from unknown lands; has he arrived upon the scene yet, Jessie?”

“ Yes,” I said, under my breath, and keeping as much as I could my face averted from my questioner. “ He came soon after you were

last at the Priory. It is about him I have to speak, Doctor Mark. I am afraid too that, nerves or no nerves, I shall have to tell, and you listen, to something like a consecutive story. I am an awful coward, now I am put to the test, but for some things it would have been worse had Hannah been, as I expected she would, my first auditor. Oh! Doctor Mark, it will require all your indulgence, all your goodness, all your pity for the poor little girl to whom you have been the best, and kindest, and dearest brother always, to make you willing to be on my side now, and to shield me against the anger and indignation of your sister."

I had felt his grasp of my hand tighten spasmodically and almost fiercely when I said that it was about Mrs. Trevanion's cousin I had to speak. As I proceeded, this was slightly relaxed. I could not long have borne it otherwise, but a stealthy glance at Doctor Mark's face had shown me that it was cruelly white and rigid, and my breath came so quickly and gasp-



ingly after this discovery, that he had to say in a gentle, soothing voice, assumed I am sure with difficulty, just then—"Go on, dear," before I was at all equal to any further speaking.

"You must let me tell everything in a few words," I continued, choking down the burning, suffocating tears that I could not afford to shed yet, and forgetting in my excitement that he had been even more anxious than myself to abbreviate the story, "or I shall certainly become dumb from the horrible effort this speaking is occasioning me. Doctor Mark, you remember of course a certain Sunday last autumn when a gentleman called on you with some enquiry about Mrs. Trevanion's health. He sent in his name as Ernest Paget. You asked me to walk round the garden with him. We stayed out looking at the flowers and talking for some time. He had a pleasant bonnie face, you may remember, and was very agreeable. I said so that same evening when Hannah abused and found fault with him. This gentleman and

Edmund Trevanion are one. I mean to say that Ernest Paget was really Edmund Trevanion, the first names belonging to him likewise. He had good and satisfactory reasons for not, on that occasion, giving his full name. Even now he makes a great point of Mrs. Trevanion not being informed of his previous visit to the neighbourhood. I assured him you would never dream of mentioning it."

By this time the sound of my own muffled voice in the otherwise death-like stillness of the room was becoming almost more than I could bear. I had spoken in brief, disjointed sentences, partly because I was too excited to choose a more flowing style, and partly because I hoped at every full stop that Doctor Mark would make some observation, or give some token that he was paying heedful attention to my story, which should at least encourage me to continue it with outward decorum and self-possession. But nothing of the kind had occurred. Doctor Mark Beresford might have been turned to stone for

any sign he had as yet vouchsafed me concerning the impression that was being wrought on him by the speaker at his feet, and but that he still held my hand (I would not for worlds have ventured a second glance into his face) I should have had no proof that the transformation just referred to had not been accomplished.

When I came, however, to a momentary halt, after telling him that Edmund did not wish his first visit to our neighbourhood mentioned at the Priory, Doctor Mark again said exactly in the same tender soothing voice as before—only this time he stroked and patted with his disengaged hand, that icy, unresisting hand of mine he was imprisoning—

“Go on, dear.”

Once more, therefore, I struggled with the fierce inward rebellion the work I had imposed on myself excited, and went on rapidly, and with wholly desperate plunges into the thick of my reluctant confessions.

“But I must still keep your attention for a

little while to the circumstances associated with that first visit, Doctor Mark. Mr. Trevanion had seen me in Yarvil a day or two before ; at church, too, that morning. He professed to have conceived a sudden liking for me. He said he would return in the summer, and ask me to show our woods to him. After this—I mean before he finally left the place—he wrote to me. I ought to have shown that letter to Hannah, or to you, but I did not. I kept it for my own secret gratification. This stranger had very powerfully impressed my imagination, and I looked forward hopefully to the time when we should meet again. I never doubted that he would come as he had promised, and my only uneasiness arose from the rebukes of my conscience on account of the deceit I was practising towards you and Hannah. Every word of kindness from either of you went at times near to break my heart, and I wanted to get away from Yarvil that I might escape being overwhelmed by this undeserved goodness. When you took me to the Priory, and Mrs. Trevanion

insisted on keeping me, I was very glad and thankful, though hating myself the while—this is solemn truth, Doctor Mark—for desiring, under any circumstances, to be free from those to whom I was, and am, under such countless obligations. But I am coming to the end now, and your patience will not be much longer tried. You know how sincere was the determination I expressed to you of coming home when I heard who it was Mrs. Trevanion had invited to the Priory. When we last parted I quite thought I should be here of my own will in a few days, but before those few days had expired the guest arrived at the Priory, and that guest, as I have told you, was the gentleman—my dream hero, if you will—whose spoken words and letter had already so warmly prepossessed me in his favour. Don't expect me, Doctor Mark, to dwell on the rest. Mrs. Trevanion soon made it clear to Edmund that she desired above all things that he should take a fancy to me, assuming, I suppose, that because he was handsome and of good birth, and

will be rich, I should easily give my heart to him. Not being able to acknowledge our previous acquaintance, we could only a day or two ago confess to her that all had turned out according to her wishes and plans ; and now, foreseeing possible opposition from my guardian or yourself, she has been urging me to an immediate and private marriage. Edmund is absent in London at the present moment, and though I had nearly consented in my weakness and madness to the course suggested, I repented in time, and came here unknown to all, except that good Mrs. Malcolm, to tell you everything. What the telling has cost me you may partially guess ; but it is done now, and you will try to forgive the erring little sister who has never yet brought a care or a sorrow to you in vain. Oh ! Doctor Mark," I concluded, my long pent up tears beginning to rush torrent-like from my eyes at last, " speak one word to me, say I have not made you very miserable, though I know I must have grieved and disappointed you in no common degree."

And looking up through that blinding mist of tears into his face, I saw that he was fighting a great fight with himself—with his emotions as a man, albeit a man of infinite tenderness and forbearance—that he might answer me mildly and considerately, and soothe rather than agitate and alarm.

It was still some seconds—terrible seconds they appeared to me, and big with my future destiny—before Doctor Mark had ruled his spirit sufficiently to speak calmly, as he wished to speak, concerning the startling matter I had so abruptly forced upon his notice. In the midst of the real grief of heart I was enduring, as well as the abject fear of what might come of it all, I could not help being struck by Doctor Mark's admirable self-command, and wondering why it was given to men and not to women to hide at will their deepest feelings.

"Jessie, my dear," he said, first when that miserable pause was broken, "you had better not ask me yet what effect this strange, romantic

story of yours has wrought upon me personally. Let that retire into the back ground, which is its fitting place, and let us speak and think only of your interests. Do you object to tell me whether Mrs. Trevanion has stood alone in her rash and extraordinary proposition that you should consent to a secret marriage with her cousin?"

The too measured voice, the too quiet face, the too simply business like manner generally were just heart-breaking, when I reflected that it was Mark, who loved me with all his strong, brave heart, who a minute or two ago had held me tightly locked in his arms, who at any time would have given his life to serve me; that it was this same Mark who, with none of his own feelings changed—that could scarcely be—felt himself bound thus calmly and indifferently to look at me, thus tranquilly and calculatingly to speak to me.

I was still sobbing half-hysterically, though with some effort at self-restraint, on the little stool at his feet. I had taken my hand out of his

when I had ended my confession, and he had not sought to regain it. In reply to his question I had no choice but to say truthfully, however unwillingly (for of course I guessed what the inference would be)—

“No, Doctor Mark, Mrs. Trevanion has not been alone in her wish for a private marriage. Edmund wished it, too, and will come home to-night, believing—hoping at least—that I shall consent to it.”

“Then,” said my hitherto undemonstrative listener, setting his teeth closely for a minute, and seeming to breathe with difficulty, “I am very much afraid, my dear, you have been deluded by a scoundrel. No man of honour, and with nothing in his past life to hide, would stoop to the meanness of stealing you in this way from your natural protectors. We may have to thank God for the instinct which brought you here to-day, Jessie. It may turn out to be the means appointed for your salvation from utter ruin and misery.”

“Oh! no, no, no,” I cried, passionately, with a sudden and entire revulsion of feeling, which drove all poor Mark’s own sufferings into that background he had called their fitting place; “you must not, you shall not, talk so of Edmund Trevanion, whom I have vowed to cling to through evil report and good report, whose destiny I would share though it led me to the world’s end, or to a prison, or to death itself. He is a man of honour, Dr. Mark, and it was only the fear of losing me through Hannah’s scruples or prejudice—you know she took a mortal hatred to him that Sunday—which led him to desire a private marriage. I could stake my life on his having nothing to conceal, on his being all he seems. If I might tell you everything you would believe it too, but I may not, because he is too noble and generous to endure the publication of his best and highest deeds. But you will do him justice one day, I am positive you will, and till then, oh! Doctor Mark, dear Doctor Mark, do believe my solemn, solemn assertion that Edmund Trevanion is in-

finitely worthy, worthy of a far better wife than I can ever be to him."

And here, panting and nearly breathless, I came to an involuntary stop, and hid my flushed and agitated face again in my two clammy, trembling hands. Only for a minute, though, because the silence that succeeded to my mad outbreak troubled and oppressed me like a close, unwholesome air, and at the conclusion of this minute I let my hands fall on my lap, raised my head abruptly, and met the full gaze of Doctor Mark's thus suddenly detected eyes, which were bent down at the crouching figure at his feet with an expression of mingled pity, love, and sadness I thought then I should never be able to forget.

He withdrew them, however, as I looked up, laid one of his hands kindly and in a brotherly fashion on my head, and spoke gently and soothingly, as to a wayward, unreflecting child.

"My dearest Jessie, you are very young and innocent, and having given your heart to this

man, it is natural you should believe him to be all that is upright, just and true. It may be that I was too hasty in my condemnation awhile ago. You must allow a little, dear, for nature even in my case ; but as your nearest connection in England, as the brother of your guardian, as the friend, Jessie, who has always preferred your happiness to his own, you must consent to my making every possible enquiry into the antecedents of Mr. Trevanion, to my satisfying myself that he is not wholly unworthy of you before I join heart and soul with you in endeavouring to root out Hannah's prejudice against your lover, and to win her approval of the choice you have made."

To this kind and reasonable demand I had no excuse for objecting. Dr. Mark's calm, matter-of-fact voice and words had toned down my excitement, had shamed me for exhibiting it, and had once more obliged me to think a little of him, and of all his unspoken trouble—*my* procuring for the man who would have dwelt to the end of

his days in the deepest gloom so that I might have walked in unbroken sunshine; *my* recompense to my best and truest earthly friend, for a patient love and tenderness a whole life's devotedness on my part could inadequately have repaid.

"You are very good to me," I said, repeating the sentence so often and often uttered protestingly in times gone by, but never uttered with such a profound and bitter consciousness of humiliation and self-reproach as accompanied the words now—"and I can't even thank you, Doctor Mark, or think of a single thing to say, which might convince you I am not quite the heartless, ungrateful, forgetful creature, I *must* appear to you. My heart is too full for any more sounding of its depths to-day. I can but leave all in your hands, even the question of repeating the whole matter to Hannah at once, or deferring it till you have done what you propose doing. You may believe me when I swear that I shall go from your presence now with your kindness, gentle-

ness, and forbearance, occupying the very first place in my thoughts, and making me hate and loathe myself because I shall never, *never* be able to pay one tithe of the vast and countless debt I owe you."

"You are mistaken, my dear child," he said with a smile that was so fleeting I don't think a tear would have been more pathetic. "Your happiness, when it is secured, Jessie, will more than repay me for all the past, as well as for all—the present." (This last word seemed to require a violent wrench to bring it out.) "And you do well to trust me, my dear. I am grateful for your confidence, and will be careful never to abuse it. As for Hannah, I think she must be told at once, but you shall have no lectures or remonstrances from her until my work is accomplished. If things turn out as you believe, and as I for your sake hope they will, you may take your guardian's ultimate consent for granted. I will see to this, Jessie; and in return I have, have I not—your sacred promise to be persuaded into no further step without consulting me?"

As he said this, Doctor Mark looked with such a fixed and almost stern enquiry into my face, that I believe I trembled as I answered in the affirmative, and then, gathering that he had no wish to prolong the interview, rose slowly to my feet, and made signs of hastening my departure.

I had hitherto, in the all engrossing nature of my special errand, forgotten Mrs. Malcolm's message in reference to her mistress's state of health. I had therefore now to tell Doctor Mark that the old lady was ill, mentally and bodily, and to ask him whether he was well enough himself, and had sufficient leisure to come to the Priory that afternoon to see her. I said what I really thought, that Malcolm was very easily alarmed, and added my own impression that it was only a case of over excitement, which any ordinary anodynes, combined with enforced rest, would soon subdue. I had in point of fact a great dread of Doctor Mark and Edmund Trevanion meeting at present, and, not knowing the hour of the latter's arrival, I could not be sure that, in the event of

the Doctor coming to the Priory to-day, such a meeting would be avoided.

But Doctor Mark, either unaware of my fears or not deeming it expedient to heed them, replied that he would drive over before the evening—he would have returned with me at once, but that he had a few patients whom he must see early in the afternoon. Then, as I had already tied on my hat, he took my still ungloved hands, tenderly as of old, into his own, and pressed them warmly.

“Good-bye, Jessie, my dear bairn. God bless you now and always, and give you, if that is indeed the best thing, your heart’s desire. This is not the farewell I thought to take of you when you first came, like a sudden gleam of light and warmth, into my dull room to-day. It is not even the farewell I would take now of the little girl who has brightened my home for two happy years, and whose place none other shall ever fill—this I swear to you, Jessie—but that I know if I yielded to the cry of my hungry heart, and for the last time held that dear face near to it as you

suffered me to hold it once to-day, an unwelcome shadow would thrust itself between us, and a voice I care not to hear, say loudly, 'not thine, but mine!' So we part as friends part, Jessie, and when you remember me at all, remember that I have forborne something you would have been too generous to deny me at this parting moment, and that the gulf this forbearance implies is an uncanny place to look into, when on a smooth road it stares a man suddenly, and without warning, in the face. Dry your tears, my dear bairn, for my sake now, and unless you wish it yourself, for any special purpose, don't let us encounter the mutual pain of another meeting this afternoon."

So I left him, choking down as best I could the tears which grieved his tender heart, and feeling (for the time at any rate), that it could scarcely be a substantial happiness which was to be built upon the ruin of this man's dearest hopes.

CHAPTER VII.

MY DREAM HERO ASTONISHES ME.

On reaching the Priory, very faint and exhausted, as much no doubt from want of food as from the agitation of my recent interview, I sent for Malcolm, and told her that Doctor Beresford was coming to see Mrs. Trevanion in the afternoon, also that I had performed my own errand, but could not guess what the result would be. I only knew that it had been a frightful ordeal to me, that I was miserably worn out, had a splitting headache, and if it were not for the expectation of Mr. Trevanion's return in the evening, would go to bed for the rest of the day.

"You do look faint and ill, my dear young lady, sure enough," exclaimed Malcolm, compassionately, "and you must have your lunch and a glass or two of wine immediately. I am thankful beyond measure that you have been given strength to do what is right—the consequences are in better hands than ours, and I would not have you a bit afraid. As for my poor mistress, I don't know what to make of her. She has been dosing and dosing ever since you went off this morning, and she wakes up with such dreadful starts and cries, that it sets me all of a tremble to hear her. I am glad that Doctor Beresford is coming—this news has taken a great weight off my mind."

"Yes," I said, absently, "it will be better for you, and now please get me a little wine and bread, Mrs. Malcolm, and then I will go to my own room till the evening. Doctor Beresford will not want to see me again to-day."

But although I was thankful to lay my aching head upon my pillow as soon as I had taken

what I could of the refreshments Malcolm hastened to bring me, I heard the sound of the Doctor's carriage wheels in the avenue about four o'clock in the afternoon, and could not resist dragging myself to the window to have one look at him when he would be thinking himself safe from my anxious scrutiny. Very pale, very careworn, very old even, he seemed to me (in that brief glance I caught as he got out of his carriage) to have suddenly become, and returning shivering to my resting-place outside my bed—surely the afternoon had grown unnaturally cold—I wished I had not been so foolish as to take even that passing look at a lost friend—a friend whose esteem and confidence I knew I *must* have forfeited for ever.

Doctor Mark was a long time in Mrs. Trevanion's room. I thought the professional visit would never be over, but at length there came the sound of closing doors, softly descending footsteps, an apparent lingering (with Malcolm, I presumed) at the foot of the staircase, the

noise of rapidly retreating wheels—I never even so much as lifted my head this time—and then profound, and, to me just then, depressing silence everywhere.

Five minutes more and Malcolm came in, with her quiet step, and cautiously approached my bed.

“Oh! I am not asleep,” I said, without, however, removing the light handkerchief I had thrown over my eyes. “I saw Doctor Beresford arrive and heard him go again. What does he think of your mistress? Nothing very seriously wrong with her, is there?”

“Ah, my dear young lady,” sighed the good woman (and the extreme mournfulness of her voice caused me to withdraw the covering from my face that I might look at her), “I am greatly afraid there is so much wrong that we can scarcely hope it will ever be set right again. Doctor Beresford is fairly puzzled himself as to my mistress’s bodily symptoms, but he does not hide from me that he fears her mind is weaken-

ing, and that if she lives she will drop gradually into complete childishness. It is an awful thought for me," added the really faithful servant, brushing some involuntary tears from her meek eyes, "not only on the poor lady's own account, but because it shuts me up from all hope as regards Mr. Charles. The will excluding him from his rights was, I know, made long ago, and this will, if not destroyed, is sure to stand—"

"You forget, Mrs. Malcolm," I interrupted, with more temper than I ought to have shown, considering what was being discussed—only I *had* been tried so cruelly to-day—"you forget that Mr. Trevanion has engaged to see justice done to his cousin, and yet I am sure I impressed it fully on your mind. Why do you all unite in mistrusting a gentleman of whom nobody knows anything but what is good? I think it is very hard and very unchristianlike, but it just makes me believe in him a million times more."

With which lofty assertion, equally creditable,

as I hope my reader will think, to my head and heart, I dragged the handkerchief petulantly over my eyes again, and said I should try to go to sleep.

Probably Mrs. Malcolm deemed it wise not to irritate me further by entering into a discussion that must be speculative on both sides, concerning Mr. Trevanion's generous intentions. She only said, in her usual respectful voice, and arranging—with a view to my greater warmth and comfort—a shawl that I had laid carelessly over my feet, as she spoke—

“An hour's sleep would be the best thing in the world for you now, miss, and if you will ring as soon as you are awake, I will bring you a cup of nice strong tea. Here is a note the doctor asked me to give you ; but he said any time to-day would do, and I was to be sure and not disturb you if you were taking a bit of rest.”

“Oh! thanks,” I replied, clutching rather eagerly at the note Malcolm was intending to place on my pillow ; “I can read it before I try

to sleep. And, by-the-bye, when shall you be expecting Doctor Beresford again?"

"To-morrow early, miss, though the good gentleman looks so bad himself from that unlucky accident that I should not have asked him to put himself out if he hadn't proposed it. He says there's just a chance that a sort of nervous fever may be setting in, and so he must see his patient again soon."

Then she left me, and I tore open the carefully sealed envelope with shaking fingers, and read the following in Doctor Mark's own clear, firm hand—

"MY DEAR JESSIE,

"I have told Hannah as much as I considered it necessary that she should learn at once. Her comments on the wholly unexpected revelation may be thus briefly summed up: 'When Mr. Trevanion comes forward in an honourable and open manner to ask from Miss Seton's guardians permission to woo her, it will

be time enough to recognise as a fact that he desires to win her in the only way a loyal gentleman would care to do.'

"Beyond this, my dear child, I have failed as yet in inducing my sister to seriously consider the matter in which you are so greatly interested. It is, however, her earnest wish and request that you return to her protection with the least possible delay; that is, as soon as Mrs. Trevanion is well enough to be informed of your recall. I shall be able to judge better on this latter point when I have seen my patient. Only one word more on my own account. Do not, my dear Jessie, shrink from obeying Hannah through any pitying apprehensions of hurting me by your temporary sojourn under my roof again. We should meet but seldom, and since my lesson must be learnt quickly of looking upon you as belonging to another man, it does not greatly signify whether it is studied with the familiar face and voice within my daily reach, or abiding as a too dear memory in my heart only. So come, my

dear, if you think that Hannah has a right to claim you for awhile, and, be assured that we shall neither of us do less now than we have ever done in seeking to promote your contentment and happiness.

“Yours always affectionately,

“MARK BERESFORD.”

In faint, pencilled characters on the envelope I discovered, when I had refolded my letter, this brief addenda—

“Mrs. Trevanion is, I believe, in a very critical state. I shall be here to-morrow, but I will warn Hannah that she must not expect you just yet.”

“Worry upon worry,” I moaned, complainingly, as I buried my face amongst my pillows, and thrust poor Mark’s kind, unselfish letter out of sight; and then, with a sudden spasm of remorse, I wept for my own exceeding selfishness

in thinking more of the hindrances to my individual happiness than of the serious state of the old woman who, whatever her faults to others, had been uniformly good to me, or even of the trouble and sadness I had that day brought into the household which had hitherto regarded me as its light and joy.

I believe I must have slept a little in the end, for on arousing to full consciousness again I saw that it was growing quite dusk, and felt that my head was somewhat better. After I had swallowed the refreshing tea which Malcolm, according to her promise, brought me—having no other news to give of the invalid than that she continued dozing and waking uneasily—I got up and dressed myself with as much care as if all things were going on smoothly with me still, for Edmund attached immense importance to my personal appearance, and I was sacrificing too many old and once valued blessings for his love not to be tremblingly anxious that no shadow of a cloud should ever come, even for a moment, across its bright-

ness. In the midst of all my fast accumulating vexations and perplexities the thought of his return to-night was one of intense happiness to me, notwithstanding my firm conviction that he would be both angry and grievously disappointed at my work of the morning. I had pictured the whole scene to myself again and again as I drove home from Yarvil, and as I lay awake on my bed before Doctor Mark's visit in the afternoon. I believed that he would storm a little at first (for I knew by this time that my lover's temper was not a compound of milk and honey), that he would call me cold and cruel, that he would swear I did not know what loving meant, and represent his own despair in the most heart-breaking terms; but finally I did not doubt that he would forgive his poor little Jessie for having acted conscientiously; that he would kiss me tenderly, and encourage me in hoping that all would yet turn out well, and that we should have, on the whole, a deliciously happy evening together.

With this confident anticipation cheering my

heart and lighting up my still somewhat pale face, I went down into the drawing-room a few minutes before the usual dinner hour, taking a book that I might not seem to be very anxious for anybody's coming when the servants passed in and out of the room.

"Will you wait for Mr. Trevanion, miss, or have dinner served now?" enquired the old butler soon after the clock had struck seven. "The cook wished me to mention that the fish would be spoiled by keeping it over ten minutes or so."

"It does not matter," I replied, nervously, caring nothing indeed for the fish, but not liking this respectable and observant individual and his companions downstairs to think I could not dine without the expected gentleman. "I don't know in the least when Mr. Trevanion will arrive. Please tell the cook to do what she considers best."

And then I was dreadfully afraid I had done wrong, and would have unsaid my words if I could, for the butler vanished instantly—I am

positive Edmund was never liked in the establishment—and returned almost immediately to announce that dinner was served.

To dine quite alone in state would have been, under no possible circumstances, agreeable to my tastes or inclinations. To-day it was simply odious to me, and fish, flesh and fowl vanished in quick rotation, with a very scant attention on my part to their respective merits. The aged butler was manifestly surprised and shocked, for I had a good appetite generally, and the dinner on this occasion was as well cooked and as daintily served as usual, making my want of relish for it appear the most capricious and absurd thing in the world; but I could not help it. I was thinking too much of Edmund and his prolonged absence to be able to eat, and when all was removed, and dessert and wine placed before me, I scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry at what seemed to my mind the ridiculous farce of the whole idle ceremony.

But I was left alone now, and that was an un-

speaking comfort, at any rate. I might run backwards and forwards to the window, listen at the door, look every two minutes at my watch, and even bite my nails to the quick, without the fear of any impertinent observations being made on such suspicious proceedings. And when at last there *was* a rumbling of carriage wheels in the avenue I could clap my hands with sudden joy and peer out into the starlight night, and finally dart back to my place at the table, sitting there with the demureness and indifference of the most accomplished actress, while the bustle of a late arrival was going on in the hall, and when in a few minutes afterwards the door of the dining-room was abruptly thrown open and Mr. Trevanion himself announced.

“Awfully late, am I not?” he said to me, as the servant retired at his bidding to bring up a portion of the dinner again. “And the old lady is ill, I hear—confoundedly unlucky, isn’t it?—but how are you yourself, Rosebud, and what good news have you got for me? By

George! I have had worries enough since I have been away to make it high time that the wheel of fortune turned in my favour. Glad to see me back, eh!—well, you'll have to prove it to me by-and-bye when these rascally servants are out of the way, and we can have a quiet talk to ourselves. Hang those trains! They are always behind time when a fellow is in a special hurry. You got my letter this morning, Rosebud?"

"Yes," I answered, thinking that this was not exactly the sort of greeting I had expected, but willing to make allowances on the ground of Edmund's probable fatigue and hunger. "I took it from the postman myself, as I was up early; it was such a pleasant surprise to me."

"I am glad it gave satisfaction," he said, looking at me steadily for the first time since he had been in the room. "I meant it to have an effect, you know, Rosebud; but you are pale to-night, more like a snowdrop than a rose—these must not be your bridal colours, my pretty one. What's the matter?"

"Oh, only the remains of a headache," I replied, uneasily, for there was something in Edmund's manner to-night, over and above what I knew of his proneness to irritability, which made me especially dread the disclosure I had to make to him presently. "It will be better—my head, I mean—now you are come. I wish I had not dined without you, but the servants evidently objected to the dinner being kept, and there was nobody to insist upon it. Are you going to sit down to table as you are? You look so tired and dusty."

He laughed a little at this, and said I was not complimentary. He *was* tired and hungry too, and as for the dustiness he thought I might excuse that as we were so soon to be man and wife. Why didn't those lazy rascals downstairs make haste? They evidently forgot that he was by-and-bye to be their master.

As soon as the clatter of dishes was audible outside, I rose to leave the room, never doubting

that Edmund would see with me that it was the only correct thing to do.'

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, "why can't you stay with me while I have a bit of dinner, Rosebud? Who on earth cares for the remarks of a set of impertinent menials, every one of whom will know the day after to-morrow that you are my wife, and that we shall reign here jointly when the old woman takes her departure. You haven't heard, I suppose, that she has promised to put into my own hands the interesting document containing her testamentary dispositions in my favour as soon as we return from church, and I introduce you to her as Mrs. Edmund Trevanion. By George! Rosebud, you must have played your cards well to win the old girl's heart so completely and so speedily as you have done. I admire you for it above everything—but what are you looking so blank and astonished about, opening those exquisite blue eyes of yours as though you saw a vision! With beauty enough to drive a man

mad, you have got some little ways with you at times, *carina*, that I am not quite sure yet whether I shall approve or condemn by-and-bye. What have I said now to displease you?"

"Here is your dinner," I answered, as the door opened, and admitted a couple of servants bearing the warmed-up soup and fish for the hungry traveller; "I am going to have some coffee for my headache in the drawing-room."

It was very nearly an hour before Edmund joined me, and I had been worrying myself with a good many disquieting thoughts in that interval; when he did come, however, having satisfied the claims of hunger—which with some men are paramount to all else—he was very lover-like and affectionate indeed, appearing to forget that anything was to be discussed between us except the important subject of which his morning's letter had treated, and assuming that I could have but one answer to give to his very reasonable request.

While he sat beside me, with my hand locked

in his, and the eyes which had first so fatally impressed my imagination gazing with passionate, and now authorised tenderness into mine, I could fear nothing except the pain of grieving and disappointing the man I loved with such utter blindness; but partly to delay the necessity for doing this, partly because Edmund had really vexed and disquieted me by his remarks in the dining-room, I told him, laughingly, that I had yet to explain the astonished look which had displeased him awhile ago; it referred, I said, to his statement about our having anything to do with the Priory at Mrs. Trevanion's death, when it had been clearly understood between us that the disinherited son was to have his natural rights restored to him.

"Of course he shall, my justice-loving little woman," he said, laughing, too, and kissing me, as though he quite approved and shared my principles; "only Charley may prefer living abroad still, you know, when he has loads of money to do the thing stylishly—and in this case he may let

you and me have this tumbledown old mansion cheap, as a token of his gratitude for our self-denial and love of justice, eh, Rosebud! *Allons*—I have satisfied you wholly on this point now, so let us talk of matters more immediately interesting to ourselves. You have no fear that my good cousin won't be well enough to give us her blessing when we return from Wallington on Friday morning?"

Then I knew my time was come, so I clung a little tighter to his hand, looked beseechingly and humbly into his face, and told him what I had done after receiving his letter that morning. I have said that I fully reckoned on Edmund receiving my news with a certain amount of irritability and anger—it would scarcely have been flattering to me had he taken his disappointment quite calmly—but nothing that I as yet knew of him could in the least have prepared me for the scene that followed my unwelcome announcement that I had confided the whole matter of our engagement to the Beresfords, and that our union


must be postponed until they had satisfied themselves that he was in all respects a suitable husband for me.

What he said I should find it difficult exactly to remember, even if it would not shame me too much to chronicle so many hard, and cruel, and violent words, addressed by the man to whom I had given my whole heart's love and faith, to the helpless woman he must have known those words were crushing and nearly killing. Suffice it that he accused me of having ruined his life's prospects, of having wantonly exposed him to insult, of having basely and unworthily deceived him, and, finally—this tried me more than all the rest—of being only a heartless coquette, accepting his devoted love with the sole object of trampling it under foot when I grew weary of it, and covering my lightness and fickleness under a specious veil of conscientious scruples.

I never interrupted him once while he thus railed at and condemned me. I watched him as he paced excitedly about the room ; a fascinated

and half insane curiosity mingling with, though subordinate to, the deathlike coldness that was creeping round my heart as I listened. I had never seen a man angry before, and the novel spectacle enchained, while it revolted and appalled me. But when the storm died of its exceeding fury, and my lover stood with white face and compressed lips waiting, I suppose, to judge what effect it had wrought upon me, I rose slowly from where I had been sitting, and moved in the direction of the door. Arrived quite close to it—Edmund following me with a lynx-eyed observation—I turned towards him and said, bitterly ashamed that I could not still the trembling of my voice—

“You have done very well, Mr. Trevanion, in revealing your character to me in time. You would have done better perhaps—I being only a timid, defenceless girl—in choosing a somewhat gentler mode of enlightening me on the subject. Anyhow, I cannot deny you the one merit of having done it effectually. As I shall return to



the home of my guardian to-morrow, I will wish you a final good-bye now. If we have the misfortune to meet again, we meet, remember, *as strangers.*”

Which I think everybody must acknowledge was as neat and proper a little speech as could have been improvised on so brief a notice, and under such excessively trying circumstances.

But, alas ! it was only the language of the lips after all ; true language, no doubt, at the moment, but protested against by the fatally ensnared heart, whose wild beatings told more of anguish at the thought of parting, than of indignation at what had made the parting expedient.

The fly who declined, on prudential considerations, to walk into the spider’s parlour knew of a certainty that once in she would have a very feeble chance of getting out again, and on a like principle I ought to have known that having voluntarily placed myself under the dominion of a strong and crafty will, by allowing the owner of that will to discover the extent of my love for

him, my foolish struggles for freedom would no more avail to set me free than would the fluttering of an insect's wing avail to burst the bars of an iron cage in which it might be imprisoned.

Edmund Trevanion could be as dangerously seductive and humble in his penitence as he could be fierce, and stormy, and abusive in his anger. And when he drew me first by tender force into his arms, and then knelt, in apparently abject self condemnation, at my feet, ascribing (with the serpent's own fatal subtlety) all his madness to the passionate love I had inspired, and the deadly fear of losing me, I was woman enough to listen and to believe, and finally to forgive with my whole heart and soul.

But the evening was very far from a happy one, notwithstanding this establishment of peace between us ; for he told me that he should now start early on the morrow for that foreign journey which he had mentioned in his letter, and the very thought of which appeared to excite and disturb him strangely. It would be the sooner

got over, he said, and the Priory would be insupportable to him when I went back to Yarvil. Mrs. Trevanion would not want visitors while she was laid up; he disliked the atmosphere of sickness, and should feel himself in everybody's way.

"Only mind this," he added in conclusion—and for a moment all the tenderness and humility so lately beaming in his face and warming my poor chilled heart, gave place to a look of quite savage determination—"when I return, Jessie, be it in three days or twice that number of weeks, I return *for my wife*, and not all the powers in earth or under the earth shall any longer keep her from me. Do you understand, *carina*? or shall I swear some oath that will frighten the roses from these poor little cheeks again? I am in a desperate mood to-night, and ready for anything."

"No, no," I said entreatingly, and in a voice so faint from all he had made me suffer that it ought to have touched him, "I understand you,

Edmund, and you must not try me any more just now. You will write to me while you are away?"

"Of course I will, my darling. I would take you with me if you would come. This leaving you behind, before I can call you my own, and with that fellow who wants you for himself, is gall and wormwood to me, and nothing but this accursed business—"

"Which I must not ask anything about?" I ventured timidly, as he paused and bit his lips hard and fiercely, seeming for a minute to forget that he was not alone—

"Ask anything about," he repeated, half absently, though I fancied there was an odd, unpleasant smile lurking round the corners of his lips. "Oh! no, my dear child. A man learns in the battle-field of life to bear his own burdens, and you must be content *carina*, if, in the future, I keep my troubles to myself, and share all my joys and pleasures with you."

Then he kissed me, and with a self-denying air which agreed well with his last magnanimous

assertion, told me I looked so wan and tired that I had better go to bed.

I only saw him for five minutes the next morning, and these were occupied in telling him how increasingly ill Mrs. Trevanion had been during the night, and how impatient her faithful Malcolm was for the arrival of Doctor Beresford.

“Then the sooner I am off and back again the better,” commented Edmund, with a sudden development of energy in his movements that in the moment of our parting I could have little sympathy with. “You had better contrive to stay and nurse the old lady, Rosebud, and remember—this is my last word to you—remember, whenever I do come back it will be, not to ask, but to take, *my wife!*”

CHAPTER VIII.

RETURNING TO YARVIL.

MRS. TREVANION having expressed a wish to have me with her as soon as she was thoroughly awake and conscious after the night of feverish restlessness which had so alarmed Malcolm, I did not think it necessary to leave my post by the sick lady's bed, when, at rather an early hour of the morning, Doctor Beresford was announced. He greeted me very kindly, though with a difference, which in my depressed state of mind I was unreasonable enough to feel, but after this he gave all his attention to his really

suffering, irritable patient, who told him she did not want him, and that she was going to get up as soon as he would be good enough to leave her room.

"Very well," he said, quietly, while he continued pressing his fingers, as if she had not spoken, upon her shaking wrist, "I shall be quite ready to go when I have done my work here, and if you do not require an extra nurse my sister would be glad for me to take Miss Seton back with me. She requested me to say as much with her compliments."

The old lady appeared at first as if she did not quite gather the meaning of this proposal, but as Doctor Mark looked at me, a fuller ray of intelligence came into the dull eye, and she cried out, with something more than a touch of her old imperiousness—

"Take her from me if you dare, Beresford. I won't have it, man, I tell you. She is mine now, and I have no other comfort. Get you gone yourself. I don't want you here. I never sent

for you, and I won't pay you a penny if you show your ugly face here every hour of the day. You are in league with that fool Malcol'm, who was never good for anything but singing psalms, to persuade me that I am ill—dying perhaps—before I have had any thought myself of ordering my shroud. Get out I say, man; you make me sick with your pulse feeling and your drugs and your nonsense. Leave this child with me—she is quite happy here—and go your own ways in peace. I ask nothing more of you.”

.Although Doctor Mark knew better than I did that much of this random talk was inspired by the inward fever he had detected in his patient, but concerning which she was ignorant herself, his eyes turned, with their wistful expression in them, towards me as Mrs. Trevanion made so confident an assertion about my being happy with her, and he said, in a patiently resigned voice that went to my heart—

“ Jessie can stay and nurse you if she likes a few days longer, but you must submit to the

nursing, my dear lady, if I consent to leave her. You must not attempt to get out of bed, and you must take regularly whatever I prescribe for you. Will you do so?"

He spoke almost as he would have spoken to a child; very gently and kindly, but with an assumption of authority I should have fancied Mrs. Trevanion would, under any circumstances, have rebelled against. She only said, however—

"You are growing into a detestable tyrant, Beresford; and I'd soon show you how I like to treat such monsters, if I didn't feel a queer hammering in my head every now and then, and something like hot quicksilver running about in my veins; but I'm not ill, man—never think it. Still less am I dying, as that idiot Malcolm would have me believe when she sits beside me in the dismal night, and moons through some of those rare old Methodist hymns of hers. I'll keep my Rosebud to nurse me if I must be nursed, because her face is bright and merry,

and she is so happy here. As for the physic, you can send it if that is your sovereign will, and what I can't drink myself I'll give to Malcolm, to moisten her poor throat when it grows hoarse from her psalm singing. Now are you satisfied, and will you go away?"

"Yes," said Doctor Mark, rising and making a signal for me to come out with him. "I think I may trust you to do what is necessary for your health, since on no other condition could I leave Miss Seton to be a companion to you. Good morning, Mrs. Trevanion. I will only detain this young lady two minutes now."

"Is she very bad?" I asked, as soon as we were standing side by side in the passage, Doctor Mark seeming for a moment to have forgotten what he had brought me here for, and to be in danger of relapsing into one of his odd fits of absence.

But at the sound of my voice, he shook off all signs of preoccupation, looked down upon me

kindly, and answered, with his full complement of wits about him—

“She is in a very serious state for a woman of her age, my dear Jessie, and will probably, unless this smouldering fever can be got under at once by strong remedies, require other nursing than you, or even her own people can give her, in a day or two. For the present, as she seems to like having you with her, and you are happy here”—(this he said in a suddenly lowered tone, not in the least a questioning one)—“I think it best not to hurry you away. If, however, the old lady grows worse, and I have to provide a professional nurse for her, Hannah would wish you to come home on Saturday, even if you only stay till Monday. She is not very well, and it might comfort her to have you for a little while. May I tell her that you will do this, my dear?”

“Of course you may,” I said, eagerly, and struggling not to show how every word of his touched and humbled me; “I will go to-day if

you think I ought, and if Hannah really cares to have me." Then I added, stupidly (for Doctor Mark would have asked no questions to pain either me or himself), "Mr. Trevanion started for the Continent on some private business early this morning."

A swift sudden accession of colour to his pale face was all the notice Dr. Beresford took of this gratuitous piece of information; but in reference to what had gone before it, he said—

"No, dear; don't come to-day, since Hannah is not expecting you; and while the old lady is in any degree sensible, she is comforted by seeing you near her. Some of us can sympathise with her on this point, Jessie," he added, with an abrupt mingling of the old tenderness in his voice, which must have been quite unpremeditated, as the next moment he stammered out something about having to speak to Malcolm, wrung my hand, and made for the staircase with such rapid strides that I thought, when he reached it, he must go down head foremost. But I

heard him address Malcolm, who had been waiting for him at the bottom, and then I breathed a huge sigh, which appeared to relieve my heart, and went back to my present post of duty beside the sick bed of Edmund's aged relative. It was in virtue of this affinity to him that it pleased me now, in his absence, to wait upon and minister to the eccentric and capricious old woman, whose extraordinary kindness to myself had established upon me a far less potent claim than the one I am referring to.

I must acknowledge, however, that in spite of this halo encircling her venerable head, Mrs. Trevanion's sick room was not a cheerful place wherein to spend a long sultry May day, especially when to the natural gloom and heaviness, inspired by the moral and physical atmosphere surrounding me, was added a good deal of mental anxiety of a purely personal kind. I had forgiven Edmund heartily and entirely for all those cruel passionate words of the night before, which had nearly stunned me at the moment of their

utterance, but I could not forget that they had been spoken, that they had been addressed to *me*, that they had appeared, at any rate, to be the spontaneous overflowings of a heart filled with bitterness, and jealousy, and mistrust; strange guests to be harboured even for a season by one to whom I had ascribed the best and highest and noblest qualities of which humanity is capable. Nor was this all that troubled and disquieted me. His whole manner, previous to that fierce outbreak, his greeting when he first arrived, his look, his words—everything that I now recalled as strange about him on his entrance into the dining room, and afterwards when he joined me in the drawing room, seemed to point to the suspicion that he had been under the influence of artificial excitement—in plain words, that he had been drinking, though I shuddered and turned sick as the thought, in this undisguised fashion, forced itself upon me. If my love for Edmund Trevanion had been less a matter of romance and imagination, more the

result of a lengthened intercourse and a gradual building up of affectionate liking, I might have been as grieved and disappointed at any discovery of moral imperfection in him as I was now, but I don't think, under those circumstances, the shock and the surprise would have been at all the same, because, as it was, the blow fell, not so much on my esteem and affection for the man, as on that excessively vulnerable and sensitive side of my character which he had instantly attracted and charmed—on my refinement; on my yearning for something above the ordinary standard, my utterly romantic belief in the actual existence of my own ideal.

Doubtless as many of my readers as are gifted with common sense, or even with the especial discernment possessed by young ladies of this delightful nineteenth century, will marvel greatly how I could ever have made a romantic ideal hero out of Edmund Trevanion, at his best, and I have no thought of trying to explain the phenomenon to them. I can only repeat that so it

was, and that having once been guilty of the folly and weakness, I had no power or strength in my feeble hands to tear the idol down from its pedestal, even when, to my dismay and shame, I discerned how little pure gold had been employed in its manufacture.

To my dismay and shame, indeed; for I had to confess to myself, as I sat that day counting the long hours in the stifling sick room, and almost envying the lazy, happy insects that went buzzing up and down the window panes, because their brief lives knew only physical enjoyments or physical wants, to confess to myself that, worthy or unworthy, noble or degraded, saint or sinner, I could not now give over loving and cleaving to the man whose parting kiss was still warm upon my lips, and to whose destiny, for good or evil, I had recklessly vowed myself.

Mrs. Trevanion had said that she liked to have me with her, and I suppose to some extent this was the case, as occasionally, when her eyes were open, she would look at me and smile, rather

weakly and unmeaningly, but still as though at the moment some pleasureable emotion flitted across her restless and generally uneasy, if clouded, mind. It must have been clouded that day, in spite of the coherence with which every now and then she would give expression to some bodily discomfort, or rail at poor Malcolm on account of some imagined neglect or over zeal, because she never asked either me or any one a single question about Edmund, never appeared to remember that he should have returned long ere this from London, and in fact, as far as external evidence went, might have forgotten his existence altogether.

Towards evening the drowsiness of the previous day became again a marked symptom of the invalid's strange and unnatural state, and then Malcolm persuaded me to go out for a little air, and not to return to the sick room till after I had had my dinner. That dinner in lonely grandeur again! How it wearied and oppressed me; how unutterably tired and stupid I thought it; and yet it

seemed so much a matter of course in that luxurious and methodically ordered establishment, that I had no courage to say it need not be served up on my account, that I would a thousand times rather have a cup of tea and a bit of something cold in my own room.

Looking back to our pleasant social meals at Yarvil, when Doctor Mark would come in, tired but cheerful, and full of tender affection and loving words for me, his "dear bairn," his "child," and latterly his "darling Jessie," I could not help acknowledging that what I missed had not been supplied to me yet by anything, except Edmund's devotion, that I had found here. I liked wealth and its natural accompaniments of luxury and refinement as much as most people. I delighted in pictures, in flowers, in costly ornaments, in soft carpets, in downy couches, and in all the rest of the desirable things that money and station can so easily command; but I was certainly discovering now that none of these were essential to my daily happiness, that I

wanted the tender love of human hearts, the genial companionship of kindred minds, and perhaps (though this I was slower in admitting) some degree of peace in my conscience, to give me that interest and joy in life without which every lagging hour must be a weariness and a pain.

I should suffer, doubtless, in many even yet unsuspected ways, whenever Hannah Beresford and myself met under the same roof again, but I quite decided, in my loneliness and *ennui* that evening, on going to Yarvil with Doctor Mark as soon as he liked to take me. I was not a strong-minded young woman, dear reader, as you have perhaps made out for yourself by this time, and I felt that anything would be better just now than solitude, with an absence of human sympathy, and the presence of a whole obtrusive company of vexatious and self-accusing thoughts.

The next day nothing improved, and Mrs. Trevanion and her symptoms did exactly the reverse. The fever, which at her age was likely

soon to consume the little vitality left in her, had plainly declared itself, her flickering intelligence was entirely gone, and Doctor Mark, when he came, looked alarmingly grave and perplexed, and said something to Malcolm about the London physician and a consultation.

How they settled that I did not know at the time, for having ascertained that Doctor Beresford had come in a carriage—he was still unfit for riding—I went out of the room and gathered a few of my things hastily together, intending to ask him to take me back with him to Yarvil.

His look when I preferred this request in a very humble voice was good to see—*would* have been good to see had I not known that it was inspired by a momentary forgetfulness of our changed relations, and that it would fade from his face, as it actually did, while I thanked him for allowing me to come, and said he must prepare me on the road for all I had to expect from Hannah.

First of all, though, when we had started, it appeared natural to both of us to speak of Mrs. Trevanion and her extremely critical condition, which laid so heavy a responsibility on her medical attendant, in the absence of every one even remotely connected with her by the ties of relationship.

It had occurred to Malcolm, Doctor Mark told me, that Charles Trevanion ought, if possible, to be sent for. The family solicitor would doubtless know of his address, and if he could receive, through the medium of a telegram, instant intelligence of his mother's state, he might at least use his own discretion concerning the expediency of coming to her at this supreme hour. Nobody seemed to have thought it mattered about Edmund being recalled ; and though in my secret heart I resented the way in which Doctor Mark, in talking to me, chose to ignore my lover's existence (at any rate as regarded his special interest in what was going on now), it

was not for me to urge his claims, or to appear as if I would for a moment put these before those of the disinherited son.

So I assented as warmly as I could to the desirableness of telegraphing to Charles, enquired what had been resolved on concerning the London doctor, agreed that it would greatly relieve Doctor Mark to consult with this gentleman, and then, feeling I had really done my duty in respect of the poor old lady who had changed my whole destiny for me, touched my companion's arm lightly with my gloved hand, and implored him to speak to me a little of Hannah, and to tell me how he thought she would receive me.

"Kindly, my dear, kindly, I am sure," he said, neither shrinking from nor welcoming the coaxing touch I had, without thinking, ventured on. "She does not expect you till to-morrow, you know, but it will please her that you have come a day earlier of your own accord, and I have no doubt your old room will soon be got ready for you."

Whether this allusion to my old room touched some chord that vibrated painfully through the heart of the man on whom I had inflicted such a deadly hurt, I cannot tell, but Doctor Mark was silent after this, and not liking to disturb him by any more questions of my own, I looked out of the opposite window, battled feebly with my nervous apprehensions in reference to the meeting so near at hand, and by the time we reached Yarvil and our own street, had the satisfaction of feeling that a single word, either of kindness or the reverse, would quite overcome me, and that in all probability my entrance into Doctor Beresford's house would be celebrated by a fit of womanish hysterics, though I *was* a Scotch girl, and hated public demonstrations of every kind.

CHAPTER IX.

HANNAH'S TACTICS.

LUCKILY for me Doctor Mark was a doctor as well as a very kind and watchful friend. He knew the signs in my pale and twitching features, as he helped me out of the carriage, and he contrived that there should be no excuse for any emotional element in my first meeting with his sister, in the same way that he had contrived to render easy and unembarrassing my first interview with the dreaded mistress of the Priory, on that April morning which seemed so very long ago.

"Oh! here is Jessie," he said, in quite a cheery

voice (dear, good, old Mark ! unselfish always), opening the door of the dining-room, where Hannah was sitting with a huge pile of account books before her ; “ she insisted on coming a day in advance of her invitation, but I assured her it did not matter, as there is nothing to get ready but that little crib of hers upstairs ; and so here she is, and you had better let her help you with those formidable accounts. The bairn, like most of her countrywomen, is a neat arithmetician, you know.”

And then he very gently pushed me before him into the room, retiring himself, and closing the door upon us, thus evincing, I thought, the only bit of masculine weakness he had shown yet, in getting out of the way of what might prove a feminine contest, though I am sure he had a very sanguine belief that it would not.

And he was right. Hannah looked up as I made a somewhat impulsive movement towards her, smiled—not warmly, not coldly, neither quite indifferently—but just serenely and with a

touch of dignity, as only Hannah Beresford could, upon occasions, smile at those who were not at the moment enjoying the rare privilege of her full esteem.

“How are you, Jessie?” she said, in a voice that matched the smile to perfection; “much better, I hope, than when you left us to recruit your health, though I think Mark told me you had been looking pale again lately. I cannot compliment you on your bloom this morning, but the weather is trying, and you have had a long drive. You had better ring at once, and give orders about your room, and then they can fetch you a glass of wine, which I am sure you want before anything else. Sit down, my dear, and untie your bonnet. I am just in the middle of last week’s accounts, but they won’t detain me much longer, and then we can have our talk, and you will be rested. Do pray sit down, Jessie.”

For I had been standing beside her chair waiting for the kiss which she had not hitherto offered, and which I was afraid, till she had said all her

say, to take without permission. As she spoke the last words, however, I stooped down and pressed my lips upon her smooth, broad forehead. I knew now that Hannah's cue was decided on, and that she intended to ignore all that had recently happened to me, to be as silent as the grave on the subject of Edmund Trevanion, unless I compelled her to express her sentiments by being the first to open the delicate matter. I ought not to have been astonished at this. It had been my excellent guardian's way, ever since I could remember, to shirk, till the very last extremity, the discussion of disagreeable things, and, as far as she could, to act and speak as though these things had no existence. I believe that many men do the same from a pure and unmitigated dislike of being bothered and annoyed, and a tendency—much more masculine than feminine—to put off any evil day as long as they possibly can; but when women thus act it is not unfrequently that they pride themselves on having sufficient strength of mind to exercise re-

ticence where weaker women would argue and babble, and that climbing to this height they can gaze down compassionately on those feeble folk who equally, or perhaps more, interested in the tabooed subject, would gladly and thankfully have it all dragged to light, fought over if needs be, and done with.

Anyhow, I am quite sure this was Hannah Beresford's principle of action, and it placed me at a miserable disadvantage, because I felt I should never myself have the courage to speak first, and I did not believe that Doctor Mark would care to help me here, after what I had obliged him to endure on his own account.

Nevertheless, as I have said, I kissed my guardian on the forehead, observed with concern that she was not looking well, thanked her for the wine she had urged me to take, and then, with a dreadful choking in my throat, sat down on a sofa behind her to wait till she had done adding up her figures and was ready to talk to me.

This domestic task occupied a longer time than we had either of us reckoned on, and at the expiration of a quarter of an hour, during which I had swallowed some wine, given orders about my room, and looked over—not read, because every word swam before my eyes—a local morning paper that I had found on the sofa, I ventured to say timidly that if Hannah did not mind I would go upstairs now, and exchange my out-of-door costume for something lighter and cooler. My head ached rather, and I was very warm and uncomfortable.

“Surely, my dear.” She answered, with that fabricated smile, than which the sternest frown would have pained me less. “You are at home here, I imagine, and can do what you like. I shall be in this room till after lunch (for Mark and myself dine together at six in the evening now), and whenever you are disposed to return, I shall be happy to have your society.”

But I nearly cried my heart out in my own little room first, the door fast locked, and stand-

ing at the window looking out on the meandering river, and the budding trees, and the distant hills—all the same that they had been a month—a year ago, and yet to me how different, because my life had expanded, and stronger emotions of hope and fear, of joy and sorrow than I had hitherto known had become, within the last few eventful weeks, interwoven with my experience, making an abstract love of nature no longer a possible thing. Henceforth I must see all, appreciate all, enjoy all through one medium. Woe unto me if that medium should grow dim or clouded, or uncertain, since every object in the outer world must of necessity receive from it its actual colouring. But this is what a woman pays for merging her own individuality in that of another human being, and there are amongst us those who come to think in the end that the price has been rather a heavy one.

At last, when I had cried enough, I washed my face, put on a light summer dress, compelled my unpractised features into as quiet and indif-

ferent an expression as they could be made to assume, and went down with some work in my hand to sit with Hannah (at needle work also by this time), and to ask her to be so kind as to tell me a little of the Yarvil news.

Not that I cared one jot for Yarvil news, as my readers will readily believe, but that I did not know in what other way I could be agreeable to my companion, and whether she chose to meet me with open assault, with coldness, or with utter indifference, I knew myself to be so serious an offender that I felt bound to lie low in the dust at her feet, and to give no sign that I resented any form of punishment my guardian might think it well to impose.

To my question about the latest occurrences in our interesting little town, Miss Beresford replied with cheerful alacrity, and assuming that I had really asked because I desired information, though she must have known better—

“Yarvil news, my dear Jessie? Well, I must consider a moment what would be news to you

amongst the various items of local intelligence current within the last week or two. Did Mark tell you anything of the Olneys in either of his recent visits out there where you have been staying?"

I half smiled to myself in noticing that Hannah declined even naming the Priory now, the house, as well as its inmates and guests, having become included, as I supposed, in her grave displeasure.

"No," I said; "not a word. Has anything fresh happened?"

"A little, and I hope there is more and better behind. Mrs. Olney has had a legacy left her by a distant relation, of a hundred pounds and some tolerably good furniture. They are now furnishing two of their empty rooms with the view of letting in the summer, when Yarvil begins to fill. They have also been enabled to procure many additional comforts for poor Lucy, who has been decidedly brighter and less fretful for some time; and, finally, I hope—though not being of

a romantic turn, nor much given to castle building, I mention this hope to you in strict confidence and under protest—that our friend, Mr. Bartrum's frequent visits to Willow Cottage are coming to have as much reference to that admirable, self-denying, hard-working Carry, as they have to her sick sister. It would be a very nice thing for them all, as he can well afford not only to keep such a careful, economical wife as Carry would make, but, for the present at least, to help her distressed family in many ways. I am sure, Jessie, this is news that, even as a distant prospect, must give you unfeigned pleasure."

"I am very sincerely glad," I said, heartily, (for just for the same reason that the afflictions of these people had always so intensely grieved and dispirited me, the brightening of their destiny would have upon my mind an opposite effect). "Carry Olney is worthy of a good husband, and I believe Mr. Bartrum will be a thoroughly good one."

"There is not the shadow of a doubt of it,"

said Hannah, with a warmth that almost suggested her surprise at my not expressing myself more enthusiastically. "If they marry it will be a union founded on mutual esteem and intimate knowledge of each other's character, the only basis on which, in my humble opinion, a life-long connection can ever, without insanity, be reared."

Stooping over my work to hide the vivid flush this remark excited, and was of course intended to excite, I observed meekly, and perhaps stupidly—

"Curates and clergymen of all kinds are especially fortunate in having opportunities of knowing and becoming known to the people they live and labour amongst. Do you go much to Willow Cottage now?"

"I have been several times lately to assist Mrs. Olney in arranging her two pretty little rooms, or to sit with Lucy while the mother and Carry are busy at the same work. You can have no

idea how cheerful and nice these cottage apartments have been made."

"No," I said, with an inward shudder, "I can never fancy any part or portion of Willow Cottage otherwise than gloomy and depressing to the last degree. It was always a weakness of mine to shrink from entering that dreary garden and still more dreary front parlour. On what prospect do these newly-furnished rooms look out?"

"On a small plot of ground which is to be planted with vegetables at the back—not a bad look out by any means for country lodgings—and when the place fills by-and-bye, they ought to get at least a guinea a week."

"Well, I hope they will," I said, infusing into my voice as much interest as I thought Hannah would expect from me; and then, having exhausted the subject of the Olneys and their future fortunes, I enquired, with a carefully suppressed yawn, whether there was any other news.

"Old Goody Brett is gone to her rest," communicated Hannah, abruptly (I think she felt she had not 'improved the occasion' of the Willow Cottage people to my edification as impressively as she might have done, and was sorry), "so the romance you and Mark talked about one Sunday afternoon has not been long working to its end. The love of fifty earthly years has revived again, we must presume, in heaven, and before the woman had time to realize that her Adam had been taken a little in advance of her to a fairer paradise than they dwelt in here. This also will gratify your poetical taste, and arouse your poetical sympathies, Jessie."

Wondering how I was to be instructed and admonished by Goody Brett's demise, I said only—

"She has been mercifully dealt with at any rate, and those immediately connected with the old woman must be thankful for her release. We don't, of course, know anything about what is happening in heaven as regards either this

aged couple or the faithful love they entertained for each other here."

"But we may reasonably conclude," exclaimed Hannah, with an emphasis that quite startled me, and suggested the metaphor of an extinguisher dabbed down abruptly upon a questionable light, "that conjugal affection strong enough to survive fifty years of the world's rough assaults upon it, in the shape of poverty, tempers, losses, sorrows of various kinds, besides the inevitable wear and tear of time itself, will lift up its head again somewhere, after the dust has covered and hallowed it. We are told that Heaven is love, but trust me, Jessie, the only *human* love that will be owned there must have been put into some such a crucible as that employed in the case we have been speaking of, that its genuineness may be thoroughly tested and proved."

The same moral again, only served up this time in a slightly different form. Hannah Beresford thought, no doubt, that she was ful-

filling her duty towards her erring ward with infinite tact and delicacy, and had she failed in pressing home upon me the admirable lessons inculcated in the above examples would almost have considered that Mr. Bartrum had begun to appreciate Carry Olney, and Goody Brett have passed to her final earthly resting place, in vain.

But I was growing a little tired of it myself, and though I had not the ghost of an appetite I welcomed the appearance of lunch as a most agreeable diversion in my favour, and when this meal was over agreed willingly to go out with Hannah to do some shopping, and call upon some of her poor people.

At the six o'clock tea-dinner I expected to see Doctor Mark, and besides that his sister and myself had pretty well exhausted every indifferent subject of any mutual interest, including a good many that had no sort of interest for me, I wanted to hear what he had done about Mrs. Trevanion's London physician, as well as about procuring from their lawyers her son's address.

But when Hannah, having made the tea and caused her brother's chair to be placed next her own, instead of by mine as it used to be at the lower end of the table, sent in to ask him to join us, he returned for answer that he was so unusually busy this evening he hoped we would excuse him, and let him have a cup of tea and a bit of meat—anything would do—in his study.

It was when this message came that Hannah Beresford, for the first time since I had returned to her brother's house, looked at me angrily and resentfully. I think she did it unconsciously, or at any rate on the impulse of the moment; but with my own readiness to condemn myself, my own present fears of having blighted the life of the best man in all the world, I was but too ready to take alarm, and to believe, as Hannah believed, that it was my presence which was keeping poor Mark away.

I could not, however, speak immediately, for I knew that my voice, as well as my eyes, would be full of tears, and before I had regained sufficient

composure not to betray what I was feeling, Hannah had also recovered her presence of mind, and was urging me to eat my dinner.

"It is only a whim of Mark's," she said, when the servant had been dispatched with his well-supplied tray, and we were alone again. "I have humoured him for this once, but I shall not do so to-morrow, I can tell him."

Then I replied, with crimsoning cheeks, and without daring to look up from the untasted food on my plate—

"If you think I am in any way the hindrance to Doctor Mark's coming in to his meals, do please let me have mine in my own room. I would much rather."

"Stuff, my dear!" ejaculated Hannah, sharply, though not unkindly. "Why should you be a hindrance to my brother's acting rationally? I'll take care it does not occur again. And now, Jessie, eat your cutlet, and when we have sent these things away we'll try to enliven ourselves by a little of your music."

Later in the evening Doctor Mark came in for a few minutes, and then he told me that he was to meet the London physician in consultation at the Priory the following day ; also that he had written to the Trevanions' solicitors, desiring them to telegraph to Charles immediately.

"These people are giving you plenty of work to do, it appears," said Hannah, who, though at the far end of the room, had overheard what we were talking about, and spoke with a considerable amount of irritability, the very name of Trevanion being a sore offence to her. "I am sure you have enough upon your hands without this."

"People can't, however, help falling ill and dying," observed the Doctor, with a grave smile, as he suddenly withdrew his eyes from a prolonged scrutiny of my face, which the rays from the lamp might have been robbing of its colour ; "and by-the-bye, Hannah, I promised Mrs. Trevanion's woman Malcolm—an excellent creature as ever breathed—to ask you if you could recommend a good, respectable nurse for her mistress.

Malcolm is too old to do the entire work herself, and none of the other servants are fit for it. Do you happen to know of anybody disengaged at present who would be likely to suit?"

"I do not," answered Hannah, coldly and decidedly. And her brother must have understood, as I did, that she meant by this a point blank refusal to have anything to do with the Trevanions and their affairs, from the least to the most important.

"Then I must have a hunt for myself," said Doctor Mark, with a little good-humoured shrug of the shoulders that was not expressive of much offence at his sister's ungraciousness. "There is no hurry for a day or so."

Presently he broke the silence which had succeeded this last remark, by adding, still speaking to Hannah—

"You had better send Jessie to bed early. She is looking ill and tired. These close spring days are terribly relaxing."

I took the kind hint very gladly and thankfully, rang for my candle, wished them a hurried good-night, and left the brother and sister together.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOMAN I SAW AT CHURCH.

DOCTOR MARK did not absent himself from any of the meals he was accustomed to take *en famille* the next day, but none the more for this could we warm into our old sociability, or shake off the depression and feeling of strangeness that clung to us all. In the evening he had to tell me about the consultation at the Priory, but I could not gather much from his communications, except that Doctor Laughton approved of his treatment hitherto, and agreed with him that, whatever form it might ultimately take, the

present would in all likelihood be Mrs. Trevanion's last illness. At her age, and with her iron constitution, it was not possible to predicate as to the number of days, or weeks, or months, that vitality might struggle successfully against disease; but should the fever increase with any greater rapidity than it was doing now, the chances were that the old woman would not live till the commencement of June. Doctor Mark added that she had still intervals of consciousness, and that in one of these she had enquired for me, and appeared for a short time very angry and excited at my not being brought to her.

I did not dare to ask him whether he was of opinion that I ought to return, because Hannah's curling lip and rigidly erected head frightened me into silence, but I meant to seek an opportunity of speaking to him alone, and to be guided by his judgment and advice in the matter.

The next day was Sunday, and I dreaded it for many reasons. It would remind Hannah of the Sunday last autumn, which, in her estima-

tion, had proved so fatal as regarded my destiny ; it would possibly recall to Doctor Mark another and a 'very happy Sunday which he and I had spent partly together in the wintry woods, he looking forward (as I could not doubt was the case then) to the bright summer that had come now, and had brought so widely different a bestowment of earth's dole for him from that he had so long been hoping and praying for. Then, too, it would bring me face to face with all our Yarvil acquaintances, oblige me to speak of my late visit in Hannah's presence, to answer no end of silly and curious questions, and to feel myself that most odious of all odious things—a temporary notoriety with a set of country gossips, on account of my accidental association with the great lady who ignored their very existence.

But entire submission, with a due amount of wholesome penance, being my appointed tasks just now, I accompanied Hannah to church as in the old times, took my seat in my old corner of

our pew, noticed with a little surprise, but a very slender amount of interest, that the lazy rector was in the reading desk, gave one look to Carry Olney, sitting demure and rosy amongst her school children, another to Mr. Bartrum in his chair by the communion table (I could not perceive that his dawning love had fattened his cheeks or improved his external appearance in any way), and then, having no other objects of even passing curiosity to seek for amongst the congregation, was slowly bringing back my wandering eyes to their proper destination on my Prayer Book, when they were abruptly and startlingly arrested by a sight that, both from its novelty and another circumstance, completely fascinated them.

In a side pew, very near to our own, and usually devoted to strangers of a rather inferior grade to the fashionable visitors of the Yarvil season, sat quite alone, this Sunday morning, a woman dressed as a Sister of Mercy, or at any rate as a member of one of the numerous reli-

gious communities for female religious devotees, now rapidly spreading over England and other Protestant countries. I cannot give the details of her somewhat picturesque attire; I only know that the head gear was snowy white and stiffened out to a considerable extent, allowing the whole face, however, to be distinctly visible. The rest of the dress was heavy black, with beads and crosses of gigantic size completing its adornment; and the effect of the whole, to an eye unused to this style of thing, was interesting and pleasing.

But it was the Sister's face which so immediately arrested and fascinated my whole attention; not the face of a saint, or even of a Magdalene, let me say at once, but the face of a woman, beautiful to some extent still, who has not only lived, but is living at the present time,—in spite of her sober, nun-like garb,—a life of stormy emotions, of bitter suffering, of violent and passionate resentments.

If you would ask how I, a mere chit of a girl,

with no personal experience to speak of, could discover so much as this in a cursory glance at an utter stranger, I can only reply, I do not know. I suppose, however, there are some few faces in the world which do, to the most ordinary observer, reveal the inner history of the hearts which are throbbing beneath. Anyhow, I state simply the impression wrought instantly on my mind by the face of that unknown Sister of Mercy in Yarvil church; and if it puzzles you still, you must just make what you can of it.

The second circumstance which I alluded to as helping to enchain my attention, when once it had been arrested by the lonely occupant of that side pew, was the fact of our eyes meeting, and hers, which were large, dark, and glittering, rather than brilliant, appearing (during that momentary encounter) as if they would pierce me through and through—see down into the very centre and heart of my being, even, as I believed, she allowed, involuntarily, the world around to see down into her own.

As quickly as I could escape from that basilisk glance I did so ; it had only lasted half a minute at most, and though secretly and cautiously I turned towards the black-robed mysterious woman perhaps fifty times while the service was going on, I never again met those terrible eyes, or discovered that their owner was looking in my direction.

After church, when we had escaped from our tiresome acquaintances and all their over-courteous greetings, I spoke to Hannah about the Sister of Mercy, and asked whether she had noticed her in the town before.

“No,” she said indifferently, “but I have seen others here on former occasions. They come begging for their special communities sometimes, or they may be employed as nurses in the immediate neighbourhood. Yarvil church, you know, attracts everybody who is staying within reach of it.”

The subject did not interest her, so I let it drop, and we talked instead of the rector having performed part of the service—a thing so rare, that

all his parishioners made a vast deal out of it, Hannah Beresford included—and predicted that he must either be going to retire, to die, or to be married.

Not quite discerning that either of these catastrophes would be a natural inference, I remarked as much, adding (after my old fashion of grumbling at country ways and notions)—

“I really have not a grain of patience with these idiotic Yarvil people. Not content with making mountains out of molehills, they cannot let a man perform the simplest act of duty that he has failed to perform regularly before (no doubt for reasons of his own) without deciding that the world is going to fall about his ears in consequence. Don't you call it absolute insanity, Hannah?”

“I think a milder term might do, my dear Jessie,” she answered, with something between a smile and a frown—something that did not seem to belong to Hannah Beresford—“but you announced your own disqualification for sitting in

judgment on your harmless neighbours, when you began by saying you had not patience with them. That is just the secret, Jessie. Youth, especially visionary and romantic youth, grasping ever at some distant and shadowy ideal of human happiness, has no patience with anything that contents itself with a lower standard—that having made the discovery, through perhaps bitter disappointment and disenchantments—that life has no sparkling gems, no pearls of price to bestow upon its wayfarers, seeks wisely to be satisfied, and to draw enjoyment from such little common everyday flowers as grow by the road-side, and may be plucked by all. I do not mean, my dear,” concluded Hannah, rather graciously (she had eaten no sour grapes to-day), “that there is anything meritorious in feeling an undue interest in the concerns of all the big and all the little people around us, but I do mean that such an interest is perfectly innocent, and if those who have nothing higher or better to think about, or having something higher and better, can still find

leisure for this, manage to extract a certain amount of pleasure out of it, nobody has a right to grudge it them, or to look down on them because they breathe freely in a close and confined atmosphere. 'Live, and let live,' is a maxim far too little acted on, yet if I were a parson I am sure I could preach a capital sermon from this simple text."

She had preached a tolerably long one, I thought, without a text at all, and marvelling whence she had drawn so much inspiration to-day, I walked on silently by her side, devoutly wishing that Sunday was over, and trying to think of some pretext for going to speak with Doctor Mark in his study alone.

He dined with us at one o'clock, but announced that he should have to start for the Priory immediately after, whereupon Hannah looked very blank and disgusted, and said openly it was excessively tiresome, as she had hoped he would have taken me for a little walk while she was away at the school.

"I would have done so gladly," he replied,

“had my engagements permitted. Jessie knows this, and will at once accept the will for the deed.”

A common enough form of words, and spoken in his most ordinary business-like voice, and yet as Mark's gaze rested on me for a moment, and the summer sunshine coming in through the closed blinds, revealed some changes in his face, some furrows of thought and care for which *time* had not to answer, I knew that it was no ordinary aching of heart he was trying to conceal, and I think Hannah must have guessed it too, as she relapsed, after this, into a gloomy and suggestive silence.

I was left alone in the house the whole afternoon, and a very miserable time I spent, wandering up and down stairs, in and out of the garden, and unable to settle to any occupation. Amongst other things that haunted me with obstinate persistency was the face of that Sister of Mercy I had seen in church, and although Hannah had formed so rational a conjecture as to

the object which had brought her to Yarvil, I could not help puzzling over it still, and wishing I knew anybody who would be able to give me information about her. Of course I told myself all the time that it was merely a vague curiosity, having its origin in the woman's very singular aspect, and in that one strange and unaccountable look with which she had favoured me ; but, vague or not, the curiosity was real and somewhat tormenting, and even the depressing thoughts excited by every remembrance of Doctor Mark that long, dull afternoon, could not chase this uneasiness away.

Hannah was detained unusually late at the school—the rector for the first time since he had enjoyed the living had roused himself to read an address to the school children, giving his gaping parishioners by so unwonted a proceeding another nut to crack—and it happened that Doctor Mark arrived home from the Priory nearly a quarter of an hour before his sister returned from her duties at the church.

I welcomed eagerly this chance of a little private talk with Mark, and the instant I knew of his being in the house presented myself at the door of his study and asked if I might come in.

"Yes, dear," he said, assuming at once a cheerful look, and drawing a chair for me near his own. "I want to speak to you and should have sent to beg you to come to me if you had not forestalled this intention. Where is Hannah?"

"Not in yet. I have been alone the whole afternoon, and very miserable in my solitude. Oh! Doctor Mark, I am afraid you can't forgive me, though you are so kind. Hannah is kind too, but every word she speaks makes me feel how I have grieved and disappointed her. It is a miserable state of things for us all, and I would—I *think* I would gladly undo the past if I could."

"The past cannot be undone, my dear," he said, very gently, very unrepentantly, but oh! how gravely and sadly!—"and I fancy we only bring upon ourselves needless pain by talking

about so impossible a thing. As for *my* not forgiving you, my bairn, the idea is simply absurd. I do not understand the love which would make forgiveness of any wrong difficult or unnatural; but it was not to talk sentiment I wanted you here, Jessie. It was to ask you about your going back to the Priory."

"Yes," I faltered, "I know that has to be spoken of. How is Mrs. Trevanion to-day?"

"About the same, I think—rather worse than better as to the internal feverishness. Malcolm says she was delirious throughout the night, and talked incessantly of you. She is of opinion (Malcolm I mean) that her mistress would often be quieted if she saw you beside her, but, as I told her, you are far from strong just now yourself, and it is not a cheerful house to be staying at under existing circumstances."

"Yet you are of opinion that I ought to return?"

He answered this question by another, after a brief interval of silence, during which Doctor

Mark knit his brows and appeared to be thinking intently—

“When do you expect Mr. Trevanion back?”

I started and coloured painfully, but replied with truth—

“I have no idea in the world—not knowing in the least the nature of the business which has taken him abroad again. Of course if he came, or if the son arrived, I should leave immediately. You could trust me, Doctor Mark, to do this?”

“Certainly, my dear,” he said kindly, though he was probably remembering at the moment that I had promised to return to Yarvil on the first arrival of Edmund Trevanion, and had *not* kept my word, “but they would scarcely either of them be here yet, and for a few days it might comfort the sick woman to have you with her again. By-the-bye, I heard this morning that there is one of those nursing Sisters of Charity stopping in the town, and if she is not engaged it would be a capital plan to send her over to the Priory. Malcolm looks quite worn out, and

Hannah did not seem inclined yesterday to recommend a professional nurse from amongst her people. What do you think? Would Mrs. Trevanion be likely to tolerate one of those quaintly attired figures by her bedside?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I said, with a most unaccountable fluttering at my heart, "that is, I see no reason why she should not—but I saw the woman you refer to in church, Doctor Mark. She is such an extraordinary looking person, with eyes like a panther, or a snake. I don't think if I were dying I should like to have her bending over me. My imagination would suggest concealed daggers, and all sorts of horrible things."

He laughed a little as he answered, "I don't suppose, however, she would carry a dagger to the Priory with her, either on your behalf or Mrs. Trevanion's. They nurse to perfection, you know, these devoted if somewhat fanatical women, and I think, Jessie, we must manage if possible to secure her—snake's eyes and all."

"Well, of course you know best," I said,

really mystified and bewildered at my own odd feelings on the subject. "And will you explain to Hannah that you think it desirable for me to return to the Priory for a few days? I don't want her to think that I am tired of being here"

"Oh, you can leave all that to me," he said quickly, "Hannah is in fact less unreasonable than she appears, and if we had loved you less, Jessie, we should neither of us have seemed unreasonable at all—I fancy that is my sister coming in at the door now. Let us go and meet her, and ask her to have a turn in the garden. You have not yet admired my bed of lilies that have just begun to bloom."

CHAPTER XL.

“SISTER AGNES” AT THE PRIORY.

DOCTOR MARK procured an interview that evening with the travelling sister, who gave her name as “Sister Agnes” only, said she was quite free of any engagement for the moment, and would very willingly undertake the nursing of the sick lady at the Priory. She did not allude directly or indirectly to her object in visiting Yarvil, and Doctor Mark acknowledged, with a face of contrition when he saw my disappointment, that it had not occurred to him to question her on the subject.

"I believe the panther eyes frightened me and kept me in order," he said, jokingly, and in reference to my observations of the afternoon; "but seriously, Jessie, I did think Sister Agnes a most remarkable looking woman, and I should not wonder if she has had a remarkable history."

"So like you two," satirized Hannah, "to be seeking a romantic and extraordinary solution of even the very shallowest mysteries. The chances are that this heroine of yours having no eligible offers of marriage, and a few high church proclivities, entered upon her present vocation in the most natural way imaginable. I really cannot see that the accidental circumstance of her having glittering eyes must needs have procured for her an exceptional and adventurous destiny."

"Nevertheless," said Doctor Mark, who kept up his old habit of siding with me whenever Hannah was disposed to be argumentative, "I fancy there is a peculiar history in this case, and if Jessie ingratiates herself with Sister Agnes she may have a good chance of getting at the bottom

of it. They will drive over together to-morrow, and then this little lady can begin her operations."

We did drive over together, Sister Agnes and myself, Doctor Mark taking his seat outside the carriage, but very slight progress was made on the occasion towards such an intimacy as would be likely to result in my being chosen for a confidante by the woman with the snake's eyes and the nun-like composure and reserve of manner.

We had stopped at the door of a very humble lodging house to take up the Sister, and Doctor Mark, having introduced us, resigned his own seat to the stranger, smiled at me significantly to remind me to make the most of my opportunity, and then left us to improve our acquaintance in any way we might think fit.

For the first half hour I tried very hard to get my companion to converse. I spoke of the town she had been staying in, of the church where I had seen her yesterday, of the scenery we were passing through, of the lady she was going to nurse, and of half a hundred indifferent things

besides, but it was all so much wasted breath and energy. The Sister uttered nothing but low, monosyllabic replies, referred continually to a small note book she had taken out of her pocket, closed her eyes at intervals as if she had long arrears of sleep to make up, and gave in short every possible indication of not being sociably disposed. When, in despair, I abandoned all attempts to make her talk, she sat as rigid and motionless as a statue, never turning towards me, though I was very fidgety and restless, looking at none of the objects on the road, not once changing her position in the slightest degree, but every now and then having upon her pale lips a smile of such a wintry and really ghastly kind, that I felt it to be even more unnatural and alarming than the expression I had encountered yesterday in those cold and glittering eyes, which were always shut fast at the moments when the smile appeared.

"She is really terrible," I whispered to Doctor Mark when, for a minute, he and I stood side by side on the terrace after he had helped Sister

Agnes and myself to descend from the carriage, and the former was gazing, with more interest than she had yet manifested, over the beautiful flower-studded lawn. "I have utterly failed in getting a word out of her, and her calmness and stoicism are not human. I don't know how Mrs. Trevanion will endure her, but I am quite sure it would give *me* a nervous fever to spend even half an hour every day in that woman's company."

Doctor Mark smiled at the earnestness with which I spoke, said I had better keep out of the Sister's way if she impressed me so disagreeably, but that he believed these nursing members of religious communities made a point of cultivating extreme quietness of manner as best adapted to the fulfilment of their duties.

"Oh, it is not her quietness I complain of," I answered, rather impatiently; and then, despairing of conveying to another, to a man especially, any idea of the shrinking, creeping sensations with which Sister Agnes inspired me, I held my peace, and accompanied him and the object of my strange aversion into the house.

While Doctor Mark was introducing the new nurse into the sick room, and looking after his patient there, Malcolm came to me and brought me a letter, which had arrived that morning. It was from Edmund, and dated from a small French town near the coast. He only said it was quite uncertain as yet how long he might be detained at this place; he hoped it would be only a few days, but in the meanwhile he wished me to write and tell him how Mrs. Trevanion was going on, how often the doctor visited her, what he thought of her condition, and all the rest of it. Likewise Edmund requested that, come what might, I would remain at the Priory until his return, and he wound up the brief communication by a most impassioned assurance of his eternal devotion, which was food sweet to the taste, and as honey in my lips for the remainder of the day.

Doctor Mark considered that Mrs. Trevanion's symptoms were increasing in seriousness, the fever rapidly wasting her strength, and thus diminishing every chance of even partial recovery.

She had looked hard at Sister Agnes when that remarkable individual had first entered the room, but beyond this had given no token of either approving or disapproving of her presence. Doctor Mark felt sure the nurse would turn out a most efficient one, and he begged me, when he came into the drawing-room for a minute to say good-bye, not to injure my own health by stopping in the sick room, but to be in the grounds as much as possible, to keep up my spirits, and to have a cheerful hope as regarded the future.

“For I don’t suppose, my dear bairn,” he added, with all his old kindness, and crushing his own pain more resolutely than he would have crushed a noxious reptile, “that I shall hear anything to the disadvantage of the man who has had the rare good fortune to win your heart—nothing at least which would justify Hannah in finally opposing what you have decided will constitute your happiness. And when Mr. Trevanion returns, Jessie, and knows that your welfare is all we really desire, he will come to your

guardian and ask her approval in a frank and manly way. The heir to a place like this, and uncounted thousands besides, would scarcely be afraid of an ungracious reception in any quarter where he might apply for a wife."

Then Doctor Mark left me, and I spent the remainder of the morning in writing to Edmund (he had told me to address to the Post Office of the town from which his letter was dated), in strolling, when this was done, on the lawn, and in thinking over the occurrences of the three days I had spent at Yarvil.

Malcolm had said it was no use my going into her mistress's room until she had an interval of consciousness and asked for me; and as I was in no hurry to renew my intercourse with Sister Agnes, I did not press the matter, but rather hoped to have this first day of my return to myself.

At lunch, however, the Sister and myself had to meet and to do the agreeable to each other—that at least would have been in the

natural order of things on the occasion of two ladies sitting down at one table to partake of a meal together, and with no third person to intrude upon them or to disturb their *tête-à-tête* in any way. As it was, I can truly declare that to me it proved a half hour of torture. Of course I did the honours, and I am quite sure, too, I did my very best to make Sister Agnes eat, and talk, and feel herself at home; but my success was no better than it had been in the carriage. She ate indeed, after the fashion of an Anchorite, who suspects a mortal sin in every particle of food daintier than stale bread or herbs, which he puts into his mouth; but the monosyllabic answers, the changeless features, the studied and unnatural iciness of demeanour were all exactly the same as they had been in the morning, and they irritated me at last to such an extent that I could scarcely keep my seat at table with the weird woman who thus tried me.

Just before we separated I asked a question that I believed must involve something more

than "yes" or "no" for an answer. I enquired what Sister Agnes thought of Mrs. Trevanion's state. With her long experience in nursing, I said, she must have met with similar cases, and would therefore be in a position to judge, with some degree of accuracy, of this one.

Without looking at me (I don't believe our eyes had ever met except for that one startling minute in church) and slowly rising from her chair as she spoke, the answer came—

"We are trained to nurse and to obey—not to judge of anything or concerning any person. If you will permit me, I will return to my duties now."

Later in the day I got at Malcolm (my only available friend and companion in the house at present) and asked her eagerly how she liked her new assistant in the sick-room.

"I *hope* she is a Christian woman, my dear," replied that single-hearted adherent of the Trevanions, "and for certain she has learnt the art of nursing to perfection, but her looks and ways

seem strange to me, and I should have thought that those who give up all for Christ's sake would strive to bear in mind more than this poor lady seems to do, that it has been expressly told us—"the Lord loveth a *cheerful* giver."

"Cheerful!" I repeated, shrugging my shoulders and half amused at the very idea in connection with Sister Agnes. "Why she cannot know the meaning of the word. I think it would be a greater relief to me to see her angry—in a downright human womanly passion, you understand, Mrs. Malcolm, than even to see her cheerful. Just fancy that calm countenance lashed up to fury through the influence of an inward tempest powerful enough to shiver to atoms the stony mask she wears. What fun it would be, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, my dear young lady," exclaimed Malcolm, horrified—indeed I suspect she thought me quite profane—"how could such a thing be with one who has dedicated herself to God? Don't you know the blessed Bible says 'they who are

Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts."

"We have no evidence," I replied, with the gravity this good woman's earnestness and solemnity naturally excited, "except Sister Agnes's outward garb, of her being a Christian, in your sense of the word, at all, and as for her having crucified or done anything to the flesh, I don't believe a word of it, though she did eat nothing but a bit of dry cold meat at luncheon, and shuddered at the very name of wine."

"Well, well," said Malcolm, with as much mild reproof as she ever ventured on to me, though circumstances had made us tolerably familiar by this time, "it is not for us to judge our fellows, my dear, and maybe in a day or two you and this stranger lady will come to understand and to like one another. I am sure I hope you will, for it must be very lonesome here now the mistress is laid up and Mr. Edmund away. For your own sake, I was a'most sorry to see you come back."

It will perhaps be scarcely necessary to tell my reader that Mrs. Malcolm's good-natured hope was not fulfilled. The stranger lady and myself remained strangers, though we met many times in the course of every day, always alone on the occasion of luncheon and dinner (Sister Agnes preferred taking her frugal breakfast of bread and milk in her own room), and generally with nobody except Malcolm present when our meeting came off beside the sick bed of the still unconscious lady of the Priory who, having neither eyes nor ears of human 'intelligence just now, did not, of course, count as a witness in the matter.

There was no particular object in my going into the invalid's room at all at this time, for she had quite ceased to have lucid intervals, and generally lay during the whole day in a kind of heavy stupor, from which Sister Agnes could only rouse her sufficiently to make her open her mouth for the light nutritious food and stimulants her two attendants had then to force gently

into it; but I grew so weary of my solitude downstairs, so sick of myself and my own thoughts, and I may add so increasingly curious on the subject of the snake-eyed woman who alternately repelled and attracted me, that I was continually making excuses for running up to speak to Malcolm, or just to see, with my own eyes, how Mrs. Trevanion was getting on, or to carry a nosegay of fresh flowers to the close room, or to do something that should bring me face to face with human beings, and afford me a renewed chance of winning even one little expression of friendliness from the marble statue who seemed so sternly determined not to be warmed by any arts of mine.

I tried one day the effect of a small offering, in the shape of a bouquet of the loveliest flowers I could find in the conservatory, all of them smelling exquisitely, and bound together by a piece of pure white satin ribbon, which I had selected from my own stores.

“These are for yourself,” I said, holding them

out to her, as she sat in her constant attitude of almost touching immobility, by one of the windows in Mrs. Trevanion's room. "They are so fragrant that if you were to pin them into your belt, I think they would refresh you throughout the day, and they will look so charming against your black dress. Oh, do please take them, and wear them. I gathered them on purpose for you."

For as yet Sister Agnes's face had not been propitious, and I had quite set my foolish heart on her accepting my flowers. So I spoke the last words eagerly and entreatingly, and with, I have no doubt, almost a childish quiver, in reference to a possible denial, in my voice.

Suddenly, and without any warning, Sister Agnes lifted her glittering, wonderful eyes, and fixed them (for only the second time, as far as I knew), upon my face. It was not quite the look she had given me in 'church that Sunday morning—it was less searching, less inquisitorial, and infinitely sadder and more pathetic. Yet somehow it had as startling and as disquieting an effect

on me as that first glance had produced, and my impulse was to shield my eyes with my hand, as people do when the sun's rays strike on them too hotly, or when an abrupt flash of lightning darts out of the angry heavens and threatens to blind them in a moment of time.

I did not, however, yield to this impulse; I only fetched a long breath, laid my flowers meekly down on the broad window-ledge, and was about to turn away, when Sister Agnes considerably withdrew her eyes, and spoke in a gentle, womanly voice—

“Thank you very much for the flowers. I will have them put in water and keep them by me. As personal adornments I abjured all such things when I renounced the world.”

And this was all, either at the time or afterwards, of noticeable effect wrought on Sister Agnes by what I hoped had been a happy idea of mine. It may be that from this time she did not avoid looking into my face quite so pointedly as she had done before, or that her answers, when

I spoke to her, were a shade less ungracious and abrupt; but I am not sure that it was so. The apparent impossibility of conciliating this remarkable woman had made me anxious to do something towards it, and it is very likely that I fancied progress when there was none.

“What can it be?” I said one day to Doctor Mark, when, after his brief visit to the sick room, he and I went down to the lawn together—“I have no doubt now that the Sister has a strong personal antipathy to me, and yet so far from having injured her, I do all I can think of to win her liking.”

“Do less, then, my dear,” replied Doctor Mark, who, I believe, set the whole matter down to my fertile imagination. “There is no reason why you should continue throwing pearls at the feet of swine; but Sister Agnes is not friendly even with Malcolm, is she? and I am sure she never speaks a single unnecessary syllable to me.”

“No, but it is not the same,” I objected, and a little vexed with him for not better understand-

ing me. "You and Malcolm have taken no special pains to please her. You are not thrown into her society as I am several times every day. You have never had those terrific eyes bent upon you as they have been bent upon me—and I want her to like me," I added, plaintively, "it is so awfully dull here now, with not a soul to speak to, and no amusement of any kind."

"Come home again, my bairn;" exclaimed Doctor Mark, with a sudden eagerness that made me wish I could recall my foolish words. "You are no good to Mrs. Trevanion while she is in her present state, and the moment any change occurs I would bring you back to her. Why not come to-day?"

"Oh, I must not indeed," I said, remembering Edmund's orders, and blushing enough to point out to my companion the quarter where the difficulty lay. "Mrs. Trevanion might recover her consciousness at any moment, and be vexed at missing me again." Then, to divert his thoughts from what I knew must be unwelcome and pain-

ful, I asked whether nothing had been heard of Charles Trevanion.

“Nothing,” he replied, gravely (he was always so distressingly grave when anything had compelled him to remember the existence of Charles Trevanion’s obnoxious cousin); “he must have changed his residence without communicating the fact to his solicitors; but they have advertised in the foreign papers, and I hope he will turn up in time. The old woman has baffled medical science so often that there is no saying what she may do now. Her pulse is better to-day, and I should not be surprised at a change in her symptoms within the next four and twenty hours.”

An oracle could not have spoken with greater precision, though the change came even before Doctor Mark had warned me to expect it.

CHAPTER XII.

“SISTER AGNES” BECOMES INCREASINGLY
MYSTERIOUS.

I WAS sitting alone as usual over a rather late breakfast the next morning, having just read for the third or fourth time a letter from Edmund, when to my astonishment and momentary alarm Sister Agnes opened the door, and advanced with very unwonted quickness into the room.

“I must apologise for this intrusion,” she said, while for a brief space her glance traversed the whole of the apartment, and finally rested on my open letter, accidentally I supposed, for there was

nothing in so simple an object to account for the sudden livid hue which overspread her face, or for the gasping way in which she drew her breath, pressing her hand tightly to her side as though a spasm of physical pain had surprised her into these unusual demonstrations of suffering, and then as abruptly left her free again, and in no sort of need of the strong coffee I urged upon her as a restorative; "but the truth is"—(she took up her sentence exactly where she had dropped it, when the spasm, or whatever it was, momentarily arrested her and frightened me into over zealousness)—"Mrs. Trevanion has awakened this morning quite sensible, and is asking for you with some importunity. As it seems, also, that my presence is unwelcome to her, I told Malcolm I would let you know that you are wanted, and take a little fresh air, in the interests of a rather severe headache with which I am troubled this morning. There will be an outlet through the grounds, I presume, to that copse I see beyond, and the sombreness of which

I shall prefer to these gay gardens. You probably walk there sometimes?"

This being by far the longest, as well as the most friendly, speech Sister Agnes had ever addressed to me, I was almost too astonished to be able immediately to reply; but seeing that she waited for an answer, with the hue of life only gradually returning to her wan cheeks, I expressed first my satisfaction at the change in Mrs. Trevanion, said I would go to her at once, and then told Sister Agnes the nearest way to the copse, adding that it was deliciously quiet there always, and that I often took my own rambles in that direction. Upon which she still further surprised and mystified me by saying—

"Then perhaps, when Mrs. Trevanion has done with you—Malcolm knows that she is not to be allowed to talk much—you will join me in the copse. I will wait for you in the first path I arrive at after leaving the gardens. Will you come?"

Sister Agnes looked into my face as she spoke,

and her eyes—though they glittered still, as if the soul that shone through them had been stricken with a fever, for which earth had no cure—those marvellous eyes were filled now with such an infinite, unutterable sadness, that the very depths of my heart were stirred with a sudden pity, and I felt the most earnest longing to know, and, if possible, assuage the bitterness of her hidden grief.

“Indeed I will,” I answered, eagerly, “the moment Mrs. Trevanion releases me. I shall be so very pleased to have a walk with you, and there are lovely wild flowers in the copse, and the birds sing there all day, and I am sure you will think it the nicest place in the whole world when once you have been there.”

Here I paused abruptly in my childish rhapsody, for the stern immobility of Sister Agnes’s face was giving way to an expression of intense and apparently ungovernable anguish, and the panther eyes had their fire temporarily quenched by an unmistakable mist of pure womanly tears.

"I am hurting you," I hastened to say, "though ignorantly and unintentionally, I am sure you will believe. Tell me how to avoid giving you pain, and you may rely on my never forgetting the lesson. If you knew how sorry I am for all human suffering—"

"My hurt," she replied, making a determined and partially successful effort to subdue the emotion she evidently deemed a sinful weakness, "is almost as old as your age. Let it be. Come to me in the copse presently, and—if I am equal to it, if my head uneasiness will permit—we will talk further."

Then she turned away, not having chilled me in the least this time by the icy mantle she had drawn once more around her to hide, I thought, the throes of the human heart that was beating, probably a funeral march, beneath; and I went straight upstairs to Mrs. Trevanion's room.

Malcolm met me at the door and whispered an earnest caution as to my not staying long to fatigue or excite the invalid who, she said, was as

weak as an infant, and twenty times more wilful, "but as sensible as you or me, my dear," added the excellent creature, with quite a cheerful smile, "and not a trace of fever or disease about her. I am going away for ten minutes while you are here, and I do wish you would reconcile my poor mistress to Sister Agnes. There never was such a nurse, and as far as I can judge there will be more nursing than ever required now."

So I thought too, as I went up on tiptoe to the bed and noticed, even on a superficial glance, how white and haggard its occupant looked, and how alarmingly the hand she stretched out to welcome me shook from weakness and the ravages of her long, exhausting fever.

"Good day, Rosebud," she said, in the feeblest of all feeble voices, though by no means a depressed or complaining one. "They tell me I have just come back from the gates of the ugly grave, but I don't believe a word of it. I have only been a little drowsy and tired for these few days, and as I often am in hot weather. You will

take care of the poor old woman now, won't you, and keep off that ghastly personage disguised as a nun, with whom it has been Beresford's good pleasure, for my sins against him, I presume, recently to afflict me. Why, she nearly slew me with the fierce lightning of her eyes this morning, only because, on first opening mine, and seeing her sitting and glaring at me, I said, innocently, 'And who may you be, madam, if in my own house I may take the liberty of enquiring, and what have you done with Miss Seton and my nephew, Edmund Trevanion?' Such natural questions, you know, Rosebud, to be asked by an unfortunate ignoramus straight from the border land; but my lady nun must have deemed otherwise, for I give you my honour she turned upon me, with her eyes at least, like a tigress, and when I uttered a little instinctive cry of terror, begged my pardon for having been slow to understand me, and said, demurely, she would go down instantly and call Miss Seton. Right thankful was I to get rid of her on any terms. Beresford

will catch it when I see him for this nasty trick he has served me ; but now, Rosebud, tell me quickly all about yourself and Edmund."

I had first, however, to give the speaker a few drops of a restorative mixture that was at hand, to keep her from fainting after the imprudent exertion of such a long speech, and then I made my communications as brief as possible, merely glancing at the fact that I had confessed all at home, hiding entirely my guardian's coldness and disapproval, and winding up with the news I had received from Edmund that morning, to the effect that he hoped to be with us in two or three days, anxiety concerning his good cousin's health having materially hastened his movements.

"Then," said Mrs. Trevanion, struggling desperately and half defiantly with her weakness and breathlessness, "you must get your marriage over at once—as soon as he comes, Rosebud. I am not ill, whatever that fool Malcolm may pretend to think, but life is uncertain with us all, and I have set my heart on seeing your future

secured, your queening it one day at the old Priory put beyond a peradventure. I shall talk Beresford over when he shows his ugly face here next time. He owes me something for having sent that woman tigress to nurse me. But ring for Malcolm now, my dear; I am a little shaky still, and she must bring me some food and wine to make me strong for your wedding. So go along and be happy with your love dreams, Rosebud, only don't forget, in the midst of them, to give that black emissary of Beresford's, or of his Satanic Majesty, whatever she demands for her services—I believe it must take the shape of a donation to the sisterhood that owns her as a member—and to send her away. That will do; I can't talk more yet. You must be tongue, and eyes, and ears, and head to the old woman now. You may replace her altogether—though I am not ill—sooner than you think for."

I did not leave her till Malcolm returned, but she only held my hand without speaking, her breath continuing to come in laboured gasps, and

everything about her (as it seemed to me) except her indomitable spirit, expressive of a very rapid decay of the life so long protracted.

But I could not feel very miserable this morning in spite of what I thought about Mrs. Trevanion. Edmund had written me a letter so full of love and devotion, so eloquent on the subject of our future happiness, so humble in its declarations of personal unworthiness, and altogether so much nicer than any letter I had as yet received from him, that my heart had overflowed with gladness as I read the precious words, and if it had not been for my appointment with Sister Agnes I should have been more than content to spend the morning alone dreaming my love dreams, as Mrs. Trevanion called them, and trying to realize that they would soon become facts in my waking experience.

As it was, I did not linger one unnecessary minute, but, tying on my hat, and catching up a little basket for some of the wild flowers with which the copse abounded, and of which I had

the bad taste to be unreasonably fond, I ran all the way to the path where Sister Agnes had agreed to meet me, and found her pacing up and down it, looking strangely excited and unlike herself.

"You have not tarried," she said, facing me suddenly, giving me a hurried glance from head to foot, and then appearing most oddly irresolute as to what was to be done next; "you are flushed with running, and—with some inward gladness perhaps. You look very bright and happy this morning."

"I feel so," I replied, wondering more and more at this calm sister's present embarrassment and suppressed emotion; "and now I am going to fill my basket with blue bells and anemones, which, to tell you the truth, I like much better than all the garden or hothouse flowers in the world. Would you care to help me, or shall I come back to you here when my task is done?"

I thought I had devised an excellent plan for setting her at her ease with me, or for delivering

her from my society if she had discovered that she had made a mistake in asking for it.

“Go and gather your flowers,” she said, with an eagerness and a look of relief, which convinced me the latter had been the right assumption. “I cannot help you, because of my aching head; but I will wait for you here.”

But when I returned in a quarter of an hour, exhibiting my treasures with genuine enthusiasm, and questioning Sister Agnes as to her pain, the signs of agitation and irresolution in her white face were quite as evident as they had been before; and though I placed myself beside her, and adapted my step to hers, she continued silent, or gave me the brief, unsatisfactory answers that had marked all our previous intercourse.

I have said that I pitied this mysterious woman sincerely, pitied her the more because of the contrast between my own present joy and her manifest unhappiness. I would have done a great deal to lighten her trouble, of whatever nature it

might have been, but her strange and unusual manner now, her obstinate reserve, her evident shrinking from all communion with me, even after she had herself invited it, not only puzzled, but, to a considerable extent, repelled and disappointed me. So when we had walked side by side for nearly twenty minutes without exchanging half-a-dozen words, I stopped suddenly, and said—

“I am afraid you find your head too bad for companionship at present. Tell me frankly if you would prefer my going away and leaving you to yourself.”

For a moment Sister Agnes, too, stood still, turned towards me with a look I shall never forget—a look that expressed first a passionate entreaty for pardon (what offence had she committed?)—and then abruptly faded into a pitiable acknowledgment of incompetency for asking, as I supposed, what she desired to obtain.

I was led to interpret it thus by her saying, presently, in a low, half-choking voice—

"I cannot. I have tried, I have prayed, I have resolved; but the power will not second the will."

Then removing her eyes, mild enough now, from my wondering and questioning face, and walking slowly on, she added, in a tired, but every day voice—

"My head is confusing me horribly this morning, and as I gather that I am no longer wanted at the Priory, I will return with the doctor when he comes, and get some needful rest in my temporary home at Yarvil. It is uncertain how long I may remain in this neighbourhood, but if I ask you once before I go to meet me here—in this same spot, *alone*—will you grant my request? You shall have timely notice, and I pledge myself solemnly, if I summon you at all, not to shrink again from saying what I am leaving unsaid to-day, even if I take an oath upon my conscience to enforce the obligation."

"I will come whenever you send for me," I replied, promptly, and really ashamed of the cold

thrill of vague terror that ran through me as Sister Agnes spoke; "but why must you go away to-day?"

"Because my work here is done," she said; "and now if you will take in your flowers, I think I should like to be left for awhile alone."



CHAPTER XIII.


DR. MARK'S WEDDING GIFT.

MRS. TREVANION'S strength did not decline so rapidly as had been anticipated, and although both Doctor Mark and Malcolm endeavoured gently to enlighten her on the subject, she persisted in declaring that she should get quiet again after a time. No arguments or persuasions would induce her to remain in bed beyond the first day of her recovered consciousness. Malcolm was obliged to dress her (in spite of the partial fainting fits which continually interrupted the operation) and establish her

easy chair by her bed room window, from whence the proud old woman could look down all day long upon the fairest part of her fair domain, mourning secretly under the conviction, which I quite believe she entertained, notwithstanding her assertions, that all earth's glories and riches were fast passing away from her for ever.

She was not long in fulfilling her threat of talking to Doctor Mark concerning Edmund and myself, and so bright a gloss did she manage to throw over the future that would await me as her cousin's wife and sharer with him in the wealth and dignity to which he was to succeed at her death, that her listener came from the conference more than half impressed with the notion that he and Hannah had been selfish and unkind in even seeking to delay my elevation to a position which promised such extraordinary felicity.

"But we will think only of you, my dear bairn, now," said Doctor Mark, repeating to me the substance of what had been discussed up-



stairs. "Hannah will be content when she has seen and talked with Mr. Trevanion. The man who could take one woman's heart by storm (and that not an easily won heart by any means) must possess some qualifications for ingratiating himself, when he has an object in doing so, with all women."


This was the only approach to a severe or bitter observation, in connection with the whole of my love affair that Dr. Mark, in his extreme tenderness for my feelings, had ever permitted himself, and I must confess that it hurt me unreasonably, though I would not let him suspect it.

He was wrong, however, as good men so often are on all matters of feeling, in the deduction he had drawn from Edmund Trevanion's power over me. For when my lover returned, and, in compliance with my earnest wishes, sought an immediate interview with Miss Beresford, that strong minded and prejudiced lady declined to be in any way won by his fascinations, told him can-

didly that she should have preferred giving the child entrusted to her care to the poorest gentleman in England whom she had had an opportunity of knowing and esteeming, and that if she did not altogether withhold her consent to the desired marriage, it was only because her brother had talked her into the belief that "the child" had set her heart upon it, and would refuse to be happy on any other terms.

"Thank heaven the ordeal is over!" said Edmund, coming back from his mission less flushed with victory than irritated at the sharp thrusts he had received in accomplishing it. "Henceforth, my dear Jessie, you will not complain if I give that virtuous female a wide berth. She has been my mortal enemy from the first, and I believe if I was going to be hanged to-morrow, she would experience a singular pleasure in looking on at the interesting ceremony."

"I am afraid she won't look on at another ceremony," I replied, trying to laugh him into



good humour, "and though we are to be married as quietly and privately as if we were a runaway couple, I should have liked the Beresfords to have sanctioned it by their presence; Hannah at all events. She was my dear mother's friend."

"I am sure *I* don't want her," he replied irreverently; "and I don't see what good a stiff ungracious old maid like that would do to you, my pretty Rosebud. If you care to have the Doctor you can ask him. I fancy he is not given to refuse you anything."

"I cannot ask him," I said, but I assigned no reason to Edmund for this declaration, and he was either too indifferent to all that concerned the Beresfords, or too preoccupied at the moment to tease me with enquiries on the subject.

I had only one chance of seeing Doctor Mark again before the day fixed for our wedding. He had promised to come over as soon as he could after Hannah's interview with Edmund, and the morning following he arrived on horseback, while I was on the lawn alone watching for him.

"Well, my bairn," he said, dismounting, and hurrying with a kind smile on his face to join me, "it is all right, you see, at last. No clouds or mists of any shape between you and the sunshine that is evermore to warm your heart and give your life completeness. I have been slow in offering my congratulations to my dear little sister, but take them now, Jessie darling, for as much as they are worth, and believe, at least, that to the end of time your happiness will be *my* happiness, your sorrow *my* sorrow."

"Oh! Doctor Mark, dear Doctor Mark," I exclaimed, piteously, "please don't say anything very kind to me this morning or you will break my heart. I know already that I owe all to you, that Hannah only gave in because of your representations, and that she really dislikes Edmund as much as ever. I would give the world if she would come to the church to-morrow, but I suppose it would be quite useless asking her, even if I humbled myself in the dust to gain the favour."

"I have done what I could to persuade her into

it," he replied, as we turned and walked a little way over the brilliant lawn together, "but I had no success in this matter, Jessie. She thinks she has conceded more than enough in not withholding her consent to your marriage, and I believe that she has a notion that she should be adding, in some mysterious way, to her responsibility if she witnessed the ceremony. You must forgive her, dear, for this crotchet, and never doubt the sincerity of her interest in you."

"No, I don't doubt that," I said; "your sister has always been far kinder to me than I have deserved, and as for you, Doctor Mark"—here I paused for a moment to battle with a lump in my throat, and then went on desperately—"I cannot speak of your goodness to me at this eleventh hour. I have done so little all along to show you that I have appreciated it, and now I am doing the very reverse; but if I could only express a thousandth part of what I really feel you would not consider me quite so heartless and ungrateful as I fear you must do at present. You

think these are mere words, Doctor Mark," I added, with some warmth, observing that he made no sign of being impressed by them, and that the gravity of his countenance did not in the slightest degree relax. "I have evidently forfeited all claim upon your esteem and trust."

"Not so, my bairn," he answered, with a soothing tenderness in his voice, as if to comfort me was just then the sole business of his life, "I believe every word you speak, Jessie darling, and I fancy I know something, too, of the lovingness and pitifulness of your womanly gentle nature, but I was thinking of another matter when you spoke. I was battling, my dear, with the strong but cowardly shrinking I have been feeling from the beginning, from the pain, momentary after all, of seeing you married to-morrow. Jessie, if it will please or gratify you I will come. Only say the word, and you shall be sure of at least one friend to support you in what I imagine must be one of the most trying hours of a woman's life."

“No, no, no,” I said, resolutely, and without an instant’s reflection (for the generosity of this proposal, which I well understood, both from previous knowledge and from Doctor Mark’s face and voice as he made it, compelled me to be a little generous too), “I won’t have you; I don’t want you. I will place the offer beside, nay, at the head of all the other kind and disinterested offices of love I have accepted at your hands; but this I refuse to accept. If Hannah declines additional responsibility *you* shall not take it on yourself. Dear Doctor Mark, we have settled everything now. Won’t you go in and see your patient?”

I could not decide, either from his look or manner, whether he intended taking advantage of the release I gave him or not. He only said—

“You are a precious child, and upon my soul I don’t know how to set about ceasing to love you above everything in the world. Of course I shall have to do it after to-morrow, but I fear

me it will be a tough lesson, my bairnie—cruelly tough and hard.”

As I turned away to hide the tears that would rush to my eyes, Doctor Mark suddenly added—

“You give me credit for unselfishness, Jessie, and behold me convicted, or nearly so, of that offence under one of its most serious aspects. Here is a note for you entrusted to me by our interesting Sister Agnes, who leaves Yarvil to-morrow, and has, I suppose, written you a touching farewell, though she charged me to give it to you privately, and not on any consideration to omit its delivery. After all her assumed coldness to you, I suspect your efforts to win her heart were more successful than we imagined at the time.”

“Perhaps so,” I said, receiving the note, and wondering again that it should send through me exactly the same cold thrill which I had experienced that morning in the copse when she asked me to meet her there once more, “but in any case her parting words will keep till by-and-

bye. I am coming into the house with you now."

As I had told Edmund scarcely anything about Sister Agnes—I did not think he would be interested in my womanish fancies on the subject—I avoided opening her present communication until he had gone out for the afternoon and evening. I ought to have mentioned before that since his return I had not spent one whole hour alone with him, as Mrs. Trevanion made me take all my meals with her upstairs, and he was continually either riding about the country on one of the fine horses he considered his own now, or executing business for himself or his disabled relative at Wallington.

We were to go away for a week only, after our marriage, and then return and take up our temporary abode at the Priory.

Sister Agnes's note contained merely these words—

"I claim the fulfilment of your promise for

this evening at seven o'clock. Let *no one* know of your errand to the copse, but be punctual, and secure yourself from any possible interruption for one hour."

"A——"

I could manage this very easily, as Mrs. Trevanion and myself always dined at five now, and after dinner, though she ate no more than a bird, the old lady invariably dosed in her chair till tea-time. The thought of the meeting, which Sister Agnes had chosen to surround with so much—perhaps wholly unnecessary—mystery, agitated me a good deal during the day, and would no doubt have sent me into her presence filled with a host of vague and unsubstantial alarms but for something else which occurred a little before the hour of my appointment, and which had the effect of at least temporarily diverting my mind from the consideration of all besides.

This was the arrival of a packet addressed to

me from my friends at Yarvil, containing a very handsome locket, with her love only, from Hannah, and a sealed envelope enclosing bank notes to the amount of one hundred pounds, with the following brief note of explanation, from her brother—

“As my dear bairn knows by this time what great happiness she conferred on me by making for a little while my dull house her home, she will not be surprised, nor grieved I sincerely trust, at hearing that it never entered into my wildest imagining to accept payment, out of her modest income, for the bed and board I had a brother’s *right* to offer her. Jessie, darling, I always meant to return you the enclosed money as soon as any crisis in your destiny occurred. It is your *own*, and you will find it acceptable at the commencement of your new life. Forgive me, my bairn, if you think there is anything to forgive, and let no ‘Scotch’ or other

pride stand in the way of your putting the notes in your purse, and using them for your immediate and personal requirements.

“Ever your faithful friend and brother,

“**MARK.**”

Dear reader, can you wonder that this letter affected me, that for awhile it banished everything else from my thoughts, and left me mentally bruised and aching, under a sense of Doctor Mark's unequalled generosity and delicacy. Will you wonder either when I acknowledge that a vast deal of my “abominable Scotch pride” was gone by this time, at any rate as far as Mark was concerned, and that the only hurt I felt in accepting his wedding gift referred to the depressing and humiliating conviction that this man had loved me as none other (not excepting my future husband) could ever do, and that I had brought sadness and desolation instead of joy and happiness into his life.

“I never was worthy of you, Douglas—
Not half worthy the ~~man~~ ^{man} you.”

These words kept ringing in my brain with a haunting monotony and persistency for hours after I had received the packet from Yarvil, went with me as I walked leisurely that sultry evening through the bright gardens and shrubberies to keep my appointment with Sister Agnes, and never left me for a minute till, on entering the sombre copse, I came face to face with that incomprehensible personage, who was leaning against a tree waiting anxiously for my appearance.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TERRIBLE INTERVIEW.

WITH such a white, resolute, and withal, anguish-stricken face, that my first impulse was to conclude that something dreadful had happened to her since we parted, and that, for a yet unexplained reason, she had desired to tell me about it.

“Are you ill?” I said, approaching her gently and offering my hand, which, however, the sister either did not see or declined taking. “I am sure you look so, and you are certainly not fit to be standing this hot evening. Let us find a

shady place, further in the copse, where you can sit down."

"Thank you," she replied, and the voice, though it was weak, like the voice of a person in ill health, betrayed the same stern resolution I had instantly detected in her face. "We will go wherever you choose, so that we do not waste time. Mine is precious, and yours probably will be claimed by those to whom you have given the right to be exacting."

"Yes," I said, with a swift blush, and thinking that a little spontaneous confidence on my part would draw us nearer together, and make it easier for her to open her evidently burdened heart to me. "I am to be married to-morrow. Had you heard it?"

"Only to-day," she replied, "or I should have come to you sooner. I have been unwell, and unable to leave my room. Doctor Beresford kindly visited me this morning. Lead on. Our moments are fast dwindling."

As I walked before my companion in search of

a convenient and sheltered spot for her to rest in, a suspicion which had already glanced across my mind more than once during my intercourse with Sister Agnes—a suspicion that she was partially though, no doubt, harmlessly insane,—grew almost to a conviction. What but insanity, or the presence of some strange delusion, could account for her having twice invited me to this secluded place, her courage, or, it might be, her memory on the first occasion failing her so oddly when she would have spoken the words which now she had unmistakeably nerved herself, at all hazards, to speak? The thought was not a pleasant one, for though it did not absolutely frighten me, it made me wish very earnestly that our interview was over, and it hindered me from saying or doing anything which, apart from this suspicion, I might have attempted to render Sister Agnes' self-imposed task lighter and easier to her.

Having found a desirable tree, with smooth, moss-covered roots, on which sitting would be almost luxurious, I turned round and invited the


sister to choose her own place, intending to remain standing myself if no opposition was made to this arrangement. But my companion would not have it so.

"You will be tired," she said, with her white lips scarcely opening to give utterance to these simply courteous words, "before my errand here is done, and I should have, moreover, to raise my voice beyond what I have quite strength for to-night. Be good enough to sit beside me."

So I sat down in mute obedience to her will, and with a growing feeling that, come of it what might, I was to play a passive and unresisting part in the drama, tragedy, or comedy that had been prepared for me on this summer evening, and the eve, too, of my wedding-day.

"And now," said Sister Agnes, plunging headlong into the dark, cold water she had sworn to wade through to-night, and without looking at me—she had not looked once straight into my face since our meeting—"and now, as I know you like romantic stories, I will tell you one in

as few words as possible—the story of the last fifteen years of my own life. Travel back in imagination fifteen years, and you will see me a girl younger, and perhaps nearly as fair, certainly quite as happy and full of hope, as yourself. My father was a poor, but highly respected clergyman in this neighbourhood, not, however, in your town of Yarvil, though I knew that well also, and often went there to row on the river, or scramble about the woods with my neighbours and companions. I had no mother at the time I am referring to, no brothers or sisters, but I loved my father dearly, and being an only child I was the pride and delight of his heart. He entreated constantly that I would not leave him while he lived, knowing that I should not be quite penniless even then, and believing, with a father's foolish blindness, that, whenever I was free, opportunities in abundance would be given me of settling well and honourably. I had at that time plenty of lovers, as all girls may have if they prefer not their own dignity to the excitement of



general admiration. I liked admiration till something better came—something, at least, which I deemed better, till experience had proved it my life's curse, and the appointed agent to accomplish my destruction.

“ It was at Yarvil that I first met the man—a mere youth then, but gifted with marvellous attractiveness—for whose love I was content to barter my soul. He made my acquaintance secretly, followed me, haunted me, waylaid me everywhere, and at length, when he saw that his power over me was complete, suggested a private marriage and a flight to the Continent, that neither his friends nor mine might interfere to separate us. We were neither of us of age, but I did not know, I do not know of a certainty now, that our marriage would be illegal on that account. He said that his means were too small to justify him in asking me openly of my father at present, but that we could live abroad for a few months or years, and that the moment he came into his fortune, which would happen at his

mother's death (she being a widow), he would bring me to England and acknowledge me proudly as his wife in the face of the whole world. An old, old, threadbare story, you see, and yet I was taken in by it because I loved the man, and would have gone with him to prison or to death if he had required it of me. This being the case, you will be prepared to hear that I deceived and left my aged father, consented to be married by a clergyman of my lover's choosing, in Yarvil church, and with only the pew opener and a very old clerk as witnesses, and after this fled with him to Germany where, for a few months—a few months, mark you, taken out of fifteen long years—I dwelt with my husband in a fool's pinchbeck paradise, believing its flowers would bloom, its gems flash back the sun, and its music roll on harmoniously for ever.—You have followed me thus far?" asked the narrator abruptly, as if she needed at this point to gather up strength for the rest. "I have succeeded in awakening your interest?"

"My deepest interest," I said in a low voice, for I had quite abandoned all suspicion of Sister Agnes' insanity, and was bewildering my brain in my futile efforts to guess what she was aiming at. "Pray go on when you feel equal to it, but there is plenty of time, and you must not fatigue or hurt yourself."

"No danger," she responded, with a smile so ghastly in its mockery of all we associate with smiles in general, that it struck a deadly chill to my heart, which had been fluttering uneasily ever since I had taken my seat beside this uncanny woman. "I can go on easily enough; my difficulty was only in beginning, and the record of sorrow and madness will be more familiar to me than the record of a brief and utterly unsubstantial joy."

"I came out of my fool's paradise, then, to discover that I had loved and sold myself to a phantom of my own imagination—to something that had a less real existence than the shadow which dogs our footsteps at noonday. My

husband began his work of disenchantment by neglecting, by railing at, by being glaringly and insultingly unfaithful to me, and during this process my heart literally withered and died—all that was good, all that was pure, all that was womanly in my nature shrank up and perished utterly. I heard of my father's death—a death I had hastened—with scarcely a pang; I endured many of the evils of actual poverty (during the times when my husband left me to struggle alone) without a consciousness of their bitterness; I encountered the coldness and mistrust of those amongst whom I lived with stoical indifference. I would have welcomed—perhaps even courted—death with joy and thankfulness, but that I knew he wanted me to die, and his gratification would, even in the grave, have marred my rest, if rest in any place could have come to me.

“ But I will hasten on, leaving you to fill up at your leisure the bare outline I am alone able to give you. He had been absent on one occa-

sion above a month, I having scarcely the necessities of existence in that interval, when suddenly he returned in a much better and more agreeable mood than when at home—*my* home I mean—he had exhibited for a considerable time. The reason of this was soon, however, explained. He wanted to bend my will to his own in a matter wherein he doubted my ready obedience, and it had occurred to his shallow mind that a little feigned kindness and affection would help to accomplish his purpose. Something—an extraordinary stroke of good fortune as he deemed it—had just happened to him.”

Here Sister Agnes made another pause, and for the first time that evening turned and looked steadily, and yet with what seemed to me a half frightened look, into my eager and attentive face. After doing this she said—

“There must be thunder in the air to-night. Don’t you feel this wood stifling? You look pale. Is my miserable story too depressing for you? May I venture to go on with it?”

"Yes, yes," I replied, catching my breath quickly, and feeling madly irritated at this delay. "Don't stop again, don't mind the effect on me of anything you have to tell. I am only pale from sympathy."

Which was a lie, and my hearer knew it, only she had got amongst the breakers now, and there was no returning to the shore—the calm, untroubled shore—for either of us helpless women.


"Well, the good fortune was this," went on Sister Agnes. "A somewhat distant relative had quarreled with her only son on account of his having contracted a marriage which she thought disgraced him. In her anger and indignation she swore he should never succeed to her money or estates—it was a wealthy and aristocratic family into which I had married—and she made known to my husband, a stranger to her, that on the condition of his choosing a wife in his own rank, and not otherwise displeasing her, it was her gracious intention to elevate him to the place her son had forfeited, and to leave him

everything she possessed at her death. I need scarcely tell you that the man I had hitherto called my husband laughed at the very idea of a wife—a mere wife—being any hindrance to his accepting the honours offered to him. He told me that our marriage was illegal, that I had no real claim upon him, and when I reminded him of the trivial fact that a child was coming whose whole future would be blasted if he refused to acknowledge me, he said lightly that the world swarmed with such children, and that for aught he had ever known they got on as well as others who were legitimately and honourably born. Upon this—this daring, cruel, shameless insult—the worm he had trampled on turned and cursed him to his face, threatened, too, to expose his baseness and destroy all his prospects unless he swore to do justice finally to my child. It is an easy thing for such men to swear, and I knew this, and obtained from him a written confession of the whole truth, for he was frightened—the miserable craven—now that he had so much to

lose, and he was quite aware that unless he murdered me I could, at any moment, rise up and scatter his brilliant expectations to the four winds; but," turning to me once more with the same questioning look in her white, quivering face, "are you sure this stifling atmosphere is not affecting you? Do you still bid me go on?"

"On," I whispered hoarsely, and with a reckless and utterly fascinated yearning to know the worst, even if that worst should kill me. "I am a woman as well as you, and I have not had fifteen years of desertion and insult to exhaust my strength; only let us be quick and get to the end of it all."


"We will," she said, taking out of her pocket a small bottle of some powerful essence, and laying it within my reach, as though she doubted the strength I had boasted of. "The man I am speaking of and myself entered at length into a compromise. I was to remain where I was until my child was born; alone of course, but with sufficient money allowed me for my proper main-



tenance, until I could make my existence known in England, and take possession of the small property left me by my father. After the birth of my child I was to commit it, if it survived, to the care of some kind but humble people, whom we had lodged with on first coming to Germany, and who had taken a warm interest in my wretched history ever since. My husband would not hear of its being brought to England until, by the death of his wealthy relative, his own future was secured. For myself, to avoid the disgrace of resuming my maiden name, which the man who had made me a wife insisted was an absolutely necessary step for his safety, I decided on entering a Protestant sisterhood, having its head establishment in an English coast town, and where a relative of my own had long held an important and honourable position. They would know my story, and while I should wear their dress and adopt a Christian name only, after their monastic custom, I should be unfettered by their ordinary rules, to the extent, at least, of being


free to come and go as it suited me, an arrangement which, if my child lived and was brought up abroad, would be indispensable to the poor remnant of comfort the destroyer of my happiness had left within my reach.

“It will suffice to say that all happened in accordance with the programme I had drawn out, when my husband came and put the seal to his cruelty and baseness. The child was born; it was a boy, and the image, unfortunately, of its unnatural father, who never saw or sought to see it, and grudged the mean pittance he was constrained to allow for its support. Of my own life during those weary years I need say very little. With a broken heart and a crushed spirit women get through their daily duties somehow, but nobody cares to know what they endure silently while treading the monotonous wheel that *must* be trodden to the bitter end. For thirteen years I went to and fro constantly to visit my boy, and to twine unconsciously round his innocent head some pale and faded garlands



of hope that ought to have died, with my heart, long, long before; but any garlands woven by my hands must needs have had poisonous buds amongst their faintly perfumed flowers, and so they killed my darling in his sweet spring time, and I became a childless wife, without a name and without a husband. The rest is easy to divine. I had still an interest, the interest of hatred and revenge, in watching the doings of the man who had darkened earth and heaven for me. It matters not to tell you what agents I employed, but they were faithful and zealous in my service, and they warned me that I was needed here if I would save another woman from a fate as terrible as my own, and avert the commission of a punishable crime. To facilitate my scheme I had to get *him* out of the way, and this I did by means of a letter telling him that he *must* meet me, by a certain day, at a town I named in France—a town where he knew our boy had been placed for his education, as I had something of the last importance to communicate to him, touching his own nearest

interests. Of course I accompanied this summons with a threat, or he would have paid little heed to it. As it was, he swallowed the bait, and I came here to watch and act, when the time for acting should arrive. It was at Yarvil church—the church I had not entered before since my marriage morning—that I first saw and recognized, by an instant intuition, which, possibly, her young, fresh loveliness had to do with, the woman who had been singled out as the second victim of my utterly worthless husband. I began by hating her, as only wronged and forsaken wives *can* hate, and, in my passionate desire for revenge on him—a desire which had long quenched every right and holy principle within me—I believe I should have been tempted to let things take their course had I discovered that this woman was one who would be likely to hold her own, and pay back to him, as his wife, a portion of the vast debt I owed him. But I found it otherwise. It did not take me long to discover that here *was* a spirit gentler, meeker, more clinging, and more



easily broken than even mine, in my first youth, had been. She was good and patient with me, too, when I tried to steel my heart, and, in some measure to prepare *her* for the cruel task I had set myself. She showed me such kindness, as soft and tender women love to show to those whose lives are manifestly blighted and accursed, and what could I do but resolve, at all risks, to save her? My first attempt failed utterly, in the immediate presence of a youthful joy and brightness which I could not doubt owed their overflow that morning in some way to *him*, but my second effort has been crowned with a miserable success, for which I could weep bitter tears of pity, if my eyes had not long years ago forgotten the womanly trick of weeping; but you, poor innocent, unhardened child—you must have tears at hand that will relieve the pressure laid at this moment on what seems to you your breaking heart. And we are alone here, and I have earned, at a bitter and terrible price, the right to sympathize with and comfort my unhappy sisters. Weep there-

fore freely and unrestrainedly, my dear. To see your pain assuaged will do me more good than to know that you forgive me."

I was awake. I knew I had not been dreaming. I saw the motionless trees around us, with bits of blue sky shining here and there through the thick branches. I held in my burning hands hugh tufts of the cool green moss, which I had torn up in my dumb pain during the last quarter of an hour. I felt the extreme and increasing sultriness of the summer air, and far off I heard distinctly the faint cry of the cuckoo as he warned his mate either of the fast approaching storm, or of the night which called the happy birds to their happy rest, amongst leafy trees, and with heaven's wide arch above them.

So, having all my senses in vigorous exercise, I knew that I was awake, and that the torturing unreality which *seemed* to surround everything, and to invest it with the attributes of a dread phantasmagoria on which I was compelled to gaze, must be only the effect of the sudden shock my

mind had received, making it for the time like a polished mirror, that reflects back clearly whatever is brought within its scope, but has no power of absorbing the minutest object.


It was strange though—at least, I thought so afterwards—that in this unnatural state I was able to give utterance to the calmest and most rational words, as well as to listen coherently and intelligently to everything that was said to myself, or spoken within my hearing. Thus, in reply to Sister Agnes's exhortation to me to relieve my heart by tears, I was enabled to tell her, in a firm voice, that my crying time had not come yet, that I had work to do first, which, seeing to-morrow was to have been my wedding day, could not be postponed for the luxury of sitting as a mourner by the grave of a dead hope.

And after this I think there was an interlude in this dismal piece we two women had been playing that summer's evening for our own edification and instruction only. I think the storm broke abruptly over us, not so much a

storm of rain as of fierce and angry thunder, accompanied by flashes of blue, jagged lightning ; and that we, too utterly miserable to be conscious of any fear, sat cowering together in our places, watching the war in the sky above us, and suspending our dreary human performance while the elements waged *their* strife in a grander and sublimer way.

And before this was quite over I think one came, in anxious haste, to look for me—finding (alas ! for himself !) rather more than he sought, and having, without a note of warning, to encounter, in the presence of the woman he undoubtedly loved with some sincerity for the moment, the wrath and scorn and bitter accusations of the woman whom fifteen years ago he had married and grown tired of, and deserted.

With all the dreaminess of my sensations at the time I have still a clear and haunting remembrance of that terrible and unexpected meeting—of Edmund's livid face when he discovered in whose company his wife of to-morrow had been




spending her evening—of his cruel assertion, when the faculty of speech returned to him, that he had believed his real wife dead when she failed to keep her appointment, and he could get no tidings of her either from her friends in Germany or from the sisterhood amongst whom she resided ordinarily—of his defying her to prove their marriage because he had himself, when at Yarvil last autumn, seen the grave dug for the old clerk who had been the last surviving witness of what he called in his insolence, “the absurd ceremony.” Of his swearing an awful oath that if she exposed him to Mrs. Trevanion, and hindered his succession to the good things that were now almost within his grasp, he would take some fearful revenge, if his own life paid the forfeit—he would strike her through her boy.

And then came slowly, but with certain aim, from the woman’s crushed heart the dreadful and unlooked for answer—“My boy is dead! Your worst was done to *me* fifteen weary years ago. Nothing that you could ever do again

would move me to lift a finger to stay your hand. To Mrs. Trevanion I *have* denounced you. The pretty story I have been telling to the hapless child here whom you had selected as a new victim, was written out and prepared for that deluded old woman some months ago. It will have been in her possession within the last hour, for I have had my agents in the household, thanks to the worldly cunning *you* taught me ; and with the sands of her life fast running out there was no time to lose. And now what will you say, for I am nerved to hear you, and the thunder has ceased its angry mutterings that a man's voice may rage the louder in the still and holy night air around us ?”

But with all his mad and savage fury against the woman who had ruined him, he had not a word to say in this supreme moment of discovering that she had done her work of revenge effectually, and that not a loophole of escape remained out of the fatal net he had in reality gathered round himself fifteen years ago, but which, at



this eleventh hour, his victim had tightened with such a firm and skilful hand that it could not fail to strangle him.

He had not a word to say; but he turned his white, contracted, evil face on me, possibly to ascertain whether any fraction of the tender love I had so recklessly acknowledged, had survived the formidable test which had this evening been applied to it. I do not know for a certainty that his look meant that. I do not even know how I looked at him in return, for my remembrances of that fearful night end here. While Edmund Trevanion's eyes and mine were meeting for the last time, the world suddenly span round with me, and the curtain fell (mercifully for me) on my part of the late grim performance.

CHAPTER XV.

A FLICKERING FLAME BLOWN OUT.

I HAD been confined to my bed for three whole days, not ill, as far as I knew, but mentally stunned and paralysed, quite unable to range my thoughts in any order,—though I did think intently and unceasingly of all the late occurrences,—taking little notice of what was going on in my quiet and darkened room, knowing that Doctor Mark visited me and bent over me with a grave and very anxious face for the first few minutes after his arrival each time that he came, knowing too that Sister Agnes had been



surrounding me with her very gentle ministrings, and that Malcolm had frequently stood beside my bed, alternately crying and praying in her meek, unobtrusive fashion.

All this I knew without being capable, through loss of brain power, I believe, of taking any advantage of the knowledge, without having the strength even to say "thank you," to any of my zealous watchers and attendants, and only feeling gratitude towards them all, in a dull, dead, spiritless sort of way; but on the third morning, when I awoke, after a more prolonged sleep than usual, I knew at once that my mind was beginning to right itself, and I was still more sure of the fact when, on Malcolm's entering the room softly and coming on tiptoe to look at me, I was able to detect symptoms of some extraordinary agitation in her calm and ordinarily undemonstrative countenance.

"I am better, my good Mrs. Malcolm," I said, frightening almost as much as I comforted her by speaking so abruptly in my natural voice,

“and you must please to sit down for a few minutes and answer my questions. I think there must be a good deal for me to learn, and I am quite strong now.—You are going to sit down?”

“The Lord be praised that the cloud is lifted off you, my poor, injured lamb!” she exclaimed with a depth of feeling I was not prepared for, and with the ready tears—some women have a gift this way—raining down her face, “and that the cruel wolf who would have devoured you was stopped from his unholy work in time. Ah! my dear, did I not tell you from the first that he was not a bit like my Mr. Charles, for all the handsomeness which young eyes are so soon took in by. And now behold the wonderful workings of a just and righteous Providence. The spoiler has gone forth, like another Cain, a fugitive and a vagabond upon the earth—for my poor lady knows all, and would have beaten him off the field with her own hands if she had had the strength—and Mr. Charles, her own true


son, is here, at her very doors, though as yet nobody has ventured to break it to her, because she is sinking fast, and we are afraid of the effect of another sudden shock."

"Oh!" I cried, sitting up in bed, and realising for the first time my physical weakness, "do not risk the danger of delay, and so lose all. Let *some* good come out of the frightful evil which has swept over me, and in which already one human life has been miserably wrecked. Mrs. Malcolm, I will undertake to tell the news, and to plead the cause of Charles Trevanion. This work is clearly mine, and no faintings of heart shall stop me in its execution. Give me that tea, or whatever it is you have brought, and then I will go at once and see Mrs. Trevanion. She will think she owes me somewhat, and she shall pay me in coin of my own choosing. Tell me, however, first, what has become of Sister —, I mean Mrs. Edmund Trevanion?"

Malcolm started a little, but replied immediately—

"She was here till yesterday evening, till Doctor Beresford assured her you were going on well, and that he would answer for your speedy recovery. Then she went back sorrowfully and sadly to her convent home, poor lady, and I don't suppose the world will ever hear much more of her. God in his mercy send comfort into her broken heart, by filling it with his own love, and so preparing her for an eternity which will make up for Time's bitter sorrows and misfortunes."

In the depths of my being I said "Amen" to this pious wish for the woman who had saved me, though only at the eleventh hour, from a fate more terrible than I could yet endure to contemplate. And then I questioned the patient Malcolm a little more concerning her dying mistress, and heard that she had never rallied entirely from the attack brought on by the reading of Sister Agnes's manuscript, which had been handed to her soon after I left the house on that eventful evening, to join the sister in the copse. Not only, Malcolm told me, was the poor lady



quite confined to her bed, but subject, every two or three hours, to such lengthened fainting fits that in each one those around her feared she would never be brought to again. "At her best times," added this faithful servant, with renewed emotion, "she talks incessantly of you, chafes bitterly and often angrily at not being able to come herself to look at you, believes you are really worse than we have told her you are, and ends by wishing she could punish her wicked relation a thousand times more than she has done by destroying the will that would have given him everything—Maybe I had best tell you now, my dear young lady, that the family lawyer is expected this evening, and that *I* think (and I fancy also our kind good doctor thinks) my mistress intends having a new will made out in *your* favour."

"In *mine*, Mrs. Malcolm!" I exclaimed, nearly dropping the cup I was holding in the unfeigned astonishment this extraordinary statement excited, "then there is indeed no time to

loss. I am afraid I am rather weak, but you will help me to dress somehow—it does not matter how, so that I can get to Mrs. Trevanion's room. Do you think Doctor Beresford will be here very early?"

"Not so early as this—perhaps not before noon. Do you wish to see him?"

"I wish *not* to see him, Mrs. Malcolm—for to-day at any rate. My brain grows confused and dizzy when I think even of meeting the friends who know all about *that*—about the dark gulf into which I was so heedlessly rushing. I do not mind you—much—nor Mrs. Trevanion in her present state, but all the rest I shrink from with a dread I should never make you understand; so let me be quick and get my errand done before there is a chance of Doctor Beresford's arriving. You can tell him that I am quite well, physically, and that I entreat him not yet to ask to see me."

By the time Malcolm had assisted me in getting a few of my things on, I was feeling very

shaky and queer indeed, and I have no doubt there was some ground for the solemn and certainly unflattering judgment my kind tire-woman pronounced upon my appearance.

“Sure no corpse was ever whiter,” she said in a voice of mingled pity and alarm, “but you are going on a mission of love and righteousness, and I have confidence that strength will be given you to carry it through.”

Then she left me to prepare her mistress for my coming, and I believed I had nerved my spirit by the time she returned for whatever fresh ordeal might be awaiting me.

Yet the pinched, colourless, sunken face of the dying woman I had to talk with, startled me dreadfully at first, and I had to cling to Malcolm, whose arm was round my waist, to prevent my knees from giving way as I reached the bed, and saw the palsied hands stretched out once more to greet me.

“My poor, poor Rosebud! my pretty faded flower! you have come to forgive me before the

grave opens to take me in, and to hide me, with all my miserable errors and sins, from the face of those whom I have wronged or wearied or alienated. Give this dear child a chair with pillows, Malcolm, and leave her alone with me for a little while. This is my strong hour of the day, and she, poor wounded dove! has not enough strength remaining in her to be able to exhaust mine. So, that will do, and you can be at hand should either of us grow faint and need you."

A mournful enough greeting, and yet one that promised more, I thought, for the success of my errand than any I had supposed it likely I should receive. As the door closed softly on Malcolm, the old woman, in whose feeble clasp my hand still remained, stroked my fingers gently and caressingly, shed a few weak and, perhaps, unconscious tears, looked earnestly and searchingly into my tell-tale face, and then spoke again in a gasping and often interrupted voice—

"My 'pretty, drooping Rosebud! it hurts me to see how changed you are, through my blind-

ness and the wickedness of that arch fiend, into whose clutches I would have guided or driven you. Small cause have you, my poor child, to bless the day when your sweet face won the lonely old woman's heart, and made her scheme to get entire possession of you. Yet I think you forgive me my part in the trouble which has come to you ;—there is no anger, no reproach, only an infinite sadness in those gentle eyes, which never looked as if they were meant for weeping. Come closer to me, my child—my voice is feeble, and I have still a word to say when you have assured me of your forgiveness.”

“ Dear Mrs. Trevanion,” I said, earnestly, and feeling that I must make every syllable I spoke a stepping-stone towards my one object, “ I have nothing to forgive as far as you are concerned ; if I had, I can promise you my forgiveness should not tarry. A great sorrow opens our eyes to many things which we saw only dimly and obscurely before. Man's possible cruelty as regards his fellowmen, and God's certain goodness to his

unthankful creatures, are lessons which we cannot learn without becoming a little wiser. If you think still you owe me some amends, I would venture, at the risk of grieving and angering you, to show you how easily you could pay me, and even leave me the debtor."

"My dearest child," she answered, quickly (I almost think she must have suspected what was in my mind), "I could never, unhappily, atone to you for the past, never undo the hideous wrong that has been done you; but something lies within my power, and that something, please Heaven to grant me strength! I intend to do to-night. You know, Rosebud, my heart was set on seeing you the mistress of the Priory, or, at least, on knowing that it would be so at my death. Well, my dear, there is nothing to hinder the fulfilment of this desire. I shall make a will, leaving you my present home and the bulk of all my other property; the rest will go to some few charities which I approve, and in legacies to my old and faithful servants. There, my pretty one,


that is what I had to say to you, and you shall kiss me, and tell me that the old woman has spoken wisely and well for once in her long life."

I bent over her and kissed her tenderly and gratefully ; I wiped the damp, which exhaustion had induced, from her pale forehead ; I smoothed back gently with my fingers some straggling locks of thin, grey hair that had escaped from beneath her cap ; I told her how good she had always been to me, and how really undeserving I felt myself of her great and extraordinary kindness. And then, still keeping tight within my own the withered and feverish hands that had sought mine in token that these caressing attentions pleased her, I said, in a half playful, half resolute voice—

"Dear Mrs. Trevanion, I don't mean to have the Priory. I don't mean to be turned into a rich and useless fine lady. Can't you see that to live in this beautiful place, associated as it must ever be with *one* memory, would continually keep open my wounds and hinder all possibility of

their healing. The compensation I want from you is not a bit like this that your generosity has suggested. It is something which in the end will make you immeasurably happier than the aggrandisement of a foolish little country girl, who would be quite out of her element in the high places of the earth. You shall leave me, if you wish it, such a legacy as you will bequeath to Malcolm, for instance, who deserves far more at your hands than I do; but the home of your ancestors and the bulk of your property, dearest Mrs. Trevanion, *must* go to the only living being who has a right to it all—to your own penitent and loving son, Charles Trevanion !”

“Who says it—who dares to speak to me of my son’s *rights* ?” she exclaimed, trying to raise herself into a sitting posture, and flinging my hands, as violently as her strength would permit, away from her. “He has no rights from me, child; they were forfeited long years ago, and for aught I know he may at this moment be lying buried



beneath the snows of Lapland, or in the depths of one of the primeval forests. Unwise, unwise, Jessie Seton, to unearth for me, in my last hours, the spectres of the past. Let me die in peace, and forget that but for the madness of him you speak of, I might have had a son to close my tired eyes, and to visit my grave when I am sleeping with the Trevanions of past generations."

"And to perpetuate the old name in the old place," I said, eagerly, taking prompt advantage of this opening in the direction of her pride of birth and family; "dear Mrs. Trevanion, I rose from my sick bed this morning to tell you that your son is close at hand—outside his mother's doors as yet, but waiting tremblingly for your forgiveness and blessing. If you relent so far, at my earnest pleading, as to grant him these, I venture to say he will never ask you for your estate or fortune. One word, only one word, and you will make so many happy."

I had been too abrupt with all my caution,

and the next moment I had to call wildly for Malcolm to support her mistress in a long and obstinate fainting fit.

So nothing more could be attempted that day, and I returned to my own room utterly dispirited and miserable, thinking with some reason that everything was going against me, and that Mrs. Trevanion had the happier lot in being near the end of a life that to most people brought only suffering and bitter disappointment.

Doctor Mark paid his usual visit, and hearing that I was up, and in improved health, respected my wish not to be intruded upon, though he told Malcolm it would have comforted him and his sister greatly had I allowed him to see me.

"Perhaps to-morrow, my dear young lady, you will not refuse him," suggested the kind-hearted woman who could, of course, know nothing of my secret feelings, "such a friend as he has been, you know, and so terribly wretched as your trouble has made him."

"Yes, yes," I said quickly, and wincing under

the cruel stabs Malcolm was innocently inflicting, "it is just this that constitutes the dread I have of a meeting with Doctor Mark at present. You don't understand, my good Mrs. Malcolm, so you must not tease me. Doctor Mark will justify me one day, and I will have a letter ready for you to give him to-morrow."

This was the letter I wrote to him—

"MY BEST FRIEND,

"Do not think me wilful or unkind—do not judge me yet. Leave me for a little while to myself, and to the misery I should be less than human if I did not feel, though perhaps it is not quite the *kind* of misery you may be imagining as my present portion. I want you, as usual, dear Doctor Mark, to do me a service. I cannot stay here long, still more impossible would it be for me to come home yet to you and Hannah. I want you, therefore, to find out whether the Olneys have still their rooms to let, and if so, I should like you to engage them for

me for the whole summer at any rate. I have plenty of money, thanks to you, though I mean to thank you properly another time, and I can afford to pay a liberal sum for the apartments, and my board, if they will provide it for me.

"I am tired now and cannot write more. I may still have to go through another interview with Mrs. Trevanion, but Malcolm will tell you all about that when you come to-morrow. Give my love to Hannah and say, please, that I hope she will approve of my wish to occupy the apartments at her friends' house—the gloom I used to shrink from will be in unison with all my feelings, now. Good bye, dear Doctor Mark.

"Your affectionate and very grateful sister,

"JESSIE."

I felt a certain degree of relief when this was done, and later in the day Malcolm came and fetched me down stairs and walked with me for a few minutes on the lawn that the air and the scent of the flowers I loved might help to

singing nurse of mine, who will insist, no doubt, in making her doggrel hymns my lullaby to the last. Bless her simple heart! I know every one of them, and should be a big dunce if I didn't, after all her hideous crooning."

The lawyer had a brief interview with his client that evening, and the next morning early Charles Trevanion was summoned to his dying mother's arms, and to comfort unspeakably by his presence and tenderness the few hours of mortal life that were yet granted to her. I remained near her also to the last, and at the earnest request of the heir and his quiet pretty little wife (who joined him as soon as he became master of the house), stayed on at the Priory till after the funeral.

When the will was read I found that the eccentric old lady had fixed my punishment at ten thousand pounds, and I am not too proud or too romantic to confess that the day came when I thought it a very agreeable way of being punished.

CHAPTER XVI.

“DOUGLAS, DOUGLAS, TENDER AND TRUE !”

IN the meanwhile Doctor Mark had diligently attended to the request made to him in my letter, and I took possession of the home I had chosen for myself the day but one following Mrs. Trevanion's funeral.

The Olneys received me with the greatest possible kindness, giving no token that they knew more than the barest outline of my miserable story, and considerately leaving me to have out my cry alone when the unexpected sight of nearly all the furniture from my own little bed room

at Yarvil, and of Doctor Mark's own piano in my sitting room, had for a few moments quite overcome me.

For as yet I had not had courage to see either the brother or sister, and as I am sure they felt keenly this apparent rejection of their sympathy, the thoughtful kindness evinced by the transfer of their own household gods to my dull rooms, was, in my idea, the more generous and touching.

I had told Malcolm, when she urged my receiving Dr. Beresford the day after I was well enough to be up, that she did not understand my feelings, and I might have added that I did not very clearly understand them myself. There was in them a mingling of shame, wonder, remorse, and a keen and yearning regret; but amidst all these sections of powerful emotion, I am sure it was shame—bitter shame—which predominated, and made the thought of a human finger upon my deadly wound so exquisitely painful and humiliating to me. Now that the scales had

must dwell apart for awhile before I should be fit for human intercourse and sympathy again. What the Olneys thought of my strange unsocial ways at this time—that is when I first went to them—I cannot imagine. They respected, however, one and all, my desire to be let alone, and never obtruded their companionship upon me.

Dreary, dreary days they were in which I used to sit hour after hour by the window of that small back parlour, looking out on the rows of newly planted cabbages, watching in sheer and listless idleness the birds that came to peck at the young leaves, and contrasting the whole scene with the fairy gardens of the Priory, and my inner life at present with the inner life I was living when I dreamt my love dreams by the sparkling fountain of the luxurious and perfumed conservatory. And yet, though it is true that I awoke morning after morning to dread the long dull day, and went to bed night after night fearing the misery its sleepless hours would bring me, it is also true that, to a certain extent, I

hugged and caressed the gloom and loneliness with which I had voluntarily surrounded myself, and would not (in the mental phase I was passing through then) have had things different, (since nothing could blot out the past,) for the whole world.

After a time, however—I cannot quite remember how soon it was—there came to me a great longing to see Doctor Mark just once. I knew he visited the Olneys tolerably often, as did Hannah too; but they neither of them ever sought to intrude upon my self-imposed isolation, and it was only from Carry, who occasionally brought in my meals to me, that I heard when they had been at the house. I did not like, after holding out so long, to acknowledge this new desire or whim of mine to anybody, still less had I the courage to give a hint of it to him whom it chiefly concerned. I could only, therefore, steal for myself a spurious kind of gratification by getting out of my low window into the back garden whenever I could ascertain that

Doctor Mark was with Lucy, and waiting, in a concealed position, to see him ride away. This was a little interest in my dull and unnatural life, and the only one I had during the greater part of that memorable summer, in which Carry Olney's love affair with the young curate progressed rapidly, Lucy brightened and expanded under the cheering influence of her sister's happiness, and the cabbages grew apace in my back garden !

I had received numberless pressing invitations from Charles Trevanion and his wife to go and stay with them at the Priory, where they naturally thought their own and their children's society would do me good, and dispel the melancholy under which I had so long been labouring ; but, of course, while I kept aloof from the Beresfords, my truest and dearest friends, any other means of getting comfort or pleasure was quite out of the question ; and so, with thanks, which could scarcely have had a genuine sound in them, I

repeatedly declined these friendly and well meant overtures.

When Malcolm got a whole day's leave and came to see me, I welcomed her as an honoured guest, and, because of the deep respect I entertained for her, listened for at least a couple of hours to all she had to tell me of her beloved Mr. Charles, of his good amiable wife, and of the four (or five it might have been for all I know) sweet, precious, blessed children.

Neither did I stop her when she preached to me very humbly and affectionately from the text of my late trial, on the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and entreated me to hew out for myself no more broken cisterns, but to take freely of that water of life which was able to quench all human thirst for ever. I only told her, as I had told Mrs. Trevanion, that I believed great suffering taught us many things, but I was a slow learner, and the heart had its own bitterness to engross and often stupefy it.

"For this also there is a remedy," said Malcolm, earnestly, and then she gave me sweet solemn Bible words, and left me to reflect on them in my loneliness.

At the end of that summer, Carry Olney and her curate were married, and though I begged to be excused from forming one of the small party that sat down to the very quiet breakfast, I made of this joyful occasion an opportunity for inviting Doctor Mark and Hannah into my own room after the bride and bridegroom had taken leave of the family. I had decided that it would be less painful to myself to meet the brother and sister together for the first time, and, as it turned out, it was not painful at all, except in the way that lavish kindness and affection oppress the soul with a consciousness of individual unworthiness.

Doctor Mark spoke very little on this occasion. I really think he felt too much to have many words at command, but all the while Hannah talked to me I knew that his eyes never strayed

far from my face, and I knew, too, that they were telling a tale of yearning love and pity for the silly lamb who had wandered from the fold and been so nearly devoured in the wilderness, which at present I was in no wise steeled to read calmly.

Very soon he made an excuse of waiting patients to leave Hannah and myself alone together, and then she disclosed to me some news for which I was certainly wholly unprepared, though a little reflection, a little going back to the two or three days I had spent at Yarvil, prior to the last sad scenes in my personal history, convinced me that it need not have been so.

Hannah Beresford—my staid, strong-minded, self-dependent guardian—was about to become the wife of our middle-aged, indolent rector, whom, however, she had nearly shaken out of his indolence as it was, and who promised, under her judicious and energetic guidance, to develop into quite a model clergyman.

“ This is not the dream of my youth, Jessie,” she said gravely and affectionately, “ but it may ensure me a very fair amount of happiness for all that. I found that I was liked by an amiable and worthy man, whom, moreover, I had the power of influencing in the right direction. My tastes and small abilities lie entirely amongst the duties I shall still have to fulfil, and I adhere to my old creed that duty, conscientiously performed, in any sphere, gives to man his only chance of earthly happiness.”

“ I do not dispute it, Hannah,” I answered, trying to smile cheerfully upon her cheerful prospects, “ and I hope I may realise the truth of it in some small measure during the next three weeks, for which period I have engaged to do Carry Bartrum’s work for her both at home and abroad. A terrible responsibility in my case, who have scarcely ever worked at all; but I have been learning grave lessons in this little back room, with its magnificent prospect of a

walled enclosure and twelve rows of cabbages. One of these lessons is, that I have lived for myself too long, and that it is high time I began to live for others."

"Then," said Hannah, moving suddenly towards me and kissing me tenderly, "I do not despair, my dearest Jessie, of seeing you yet a very happy woman, and happy in the way you once deemed ludicrously impossible—even in the discharge of humdrum monotonous duties (round which a pure human charity can cast a lovely halo) in our despised and ugly town of Yarvil. A rich lady, like Jessie Seton, has so much in her power," she added, with her pleasant laugh, "and there are hundreds who will gladly and thankfully hail your final settling amongst them."

During those few weeks of my vicarious labours at Yarvil I saw Doctor Mark often, and I sometimes spent an afternoon at his house with Hannah. But he and I had no private meetings,

no opportunity had either of us wished it (which probably we did not) for any allusion, however distant, to the sorrowful past.

But there came a day when this good and loving brother had to give his sister and only companion to the keeping and companionship of another, though assuredly not a better, man, and after the somewhat trying ceremony, at which I, too, had assisted, Doctor Mark asked me if he might come that evening and spend half an hour with me in my lodgings, as he wanted to talk seriously to me on the subject of my future mode of life.

“ Oh come, by all means,” I said, with a faint smile (for nobody is expected to be gay at the conclusion of a wedding) “ only don’t confuse my poor brain by discoursing about investments, and capital, and interest, and all the rest of it. If you think it desirable that I should buy a house out of Mrs. Trevanion’s money, buy it for me wherever you like. I am not particular, so

that there is a good garden to it—and no cabbages !”

“No cabbages !” repeated Doctor Mark, laughing rather more merrily than I had known him do for some time, which was scarcely the thing just as he had parted from his only sister ; “I will make a note of that item in your non-requirements, Jessie, and pay especial attention to it.”

When he came, the late summer twilight was fast coming too, and having been amusing myself for a little while at the piano I sat still in my place by the open instrument, after I had given my self-invited guest a hospitable greeting.

He began, as of course I knew he would, by reading me a prosy description of several desirable houses to be let or sold in the neighbourhood, and having got through his whole list he looked round at me and asked what I thought of them respectively.

“I beg your pardon, Doctor Mark,” I said,

half-laughing, though secretly having a dreadful longing to cry ; “ but I don’t think I was attending quite to what you were reading. Never mind the houses to-night, please. There is abundance of time for all that. Let me ring and ask them to bring us some tea. You know you have come to drink tea with me.”

“ No—no, don’t ring,” he pleaded, arresting my hand, and not immediately letting it go again ; “ we are not in a hurry for tea, my dear bairn, and I want you to tell me why you were not listening to my reading. What were you thinking about, Jessie?”

“ I suppose my thoughts are my own, Doctor Mark,” I said, a little saucily, for it was so like old times to have him beside me again, and I really felt almost happy to-night. “ However, as you are my guest I don’t mind being civil, and answering your question. What should I have been thinking about but Hannah who has just left us, and a little—a very little, perhaps—of your loneliness without her.”

"My dear bairn, that was kind of you," he said, somewhat mournfully (he had not yet caught the infection of my unwonted brightness); "but don't distress that tender heart of yours on my account. I shall bear my loneliness the better for having sounded the depths of real desolation some months ago. Jessie, darling, forgive me," he added, quickly, as he felt my hand quiver in his; "I did not mean to allude to-night, or at any future time to the weary past. It is dead and buried, and my chief regret now is that your happiness has not arisen on its ruins; can you believe this?"

"I should be very sorry to believe," I said, in a low voice, "that you regretted my escape from a destiny which only a girl's infatuated imagination could ever have painted as bright or desirable. I don't regret it, Doctor Mark. My sorrow, my mourning, my shame, have been for my own wild error, which has cost me the confidence and esteem of my best friends—for nothing more."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, in a voice so earnest and so passionate that it thrilled to my inmost heart. "Are you dreaming, Jessie, dearest, or am I? If you count me amongst your best friends you must know that my esteem, my confidence, my love have never been diverted from you for a single moment. Oh! my darling, my dearest in all the world, don't torture me, but if there is still one faint, faint ray of hope for me, in mercy tell me so."

"Let me sing you a song instead," I said, though my voice shook, even in speaking, to such a ridiculous extent that singing would naturally have appeared entirely beyond my present ability. I was resolute, however, and when he released, with one yearning pressure, the hands he had been holding, I turned round to the piano and began his own old song, which I had once promised never again to sing to him till he asked me for it.

I am ashamed to say I made a disgraceful mess of the first verse, and was not more successful

with the second or third. The tears were coming down my hot cheeks like rain by this time, and when I arrived at the fourth stanza I gave it all up, and turning impulsively to the spell-bound Mark behind me, put my arms about his neck and whispered the words I had no power to sing to him; whispered this, as he held me closely pressed to his faithful and tender heart—

“I never was worthy of you, Douglas,
Not half worthy the like of you,
Now all men beside seem to me like shadows,
I love you, Douglas, tender and true.”

THE END.



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